

THE STRUGGLE FOR A PURE CHURCH

BIBLICAL SEPARATION

ERNEST PICKERING

WITH MYRON HOUGHTON



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Biblical Separation: The Struggle for a Pure Church

Second Edition

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Foreword

TO THE SECOND EDITION

WHEN ERNEST PICKERING wrote *Biblical Separation* in 1979, fundamentalism had not yet benefited from the dozens of academic studies that would be produced in the 1980s and '90s. Most fundamentalist leaders were at least mildly peeved about the public's perception of the movement, believing that media attention was often dismissive and inaccurate. And despite their historic suspicion of scholarly research, fundamentalists were oddly hurt when academic studies seemed to ignore their core theological values. For fundamentalists, the 1970s was a period of resurgence in the popular conscience, but not a period of enhanced understanding.

It had been this way since the 1925 Scopes trial, when it became popular to parody fundamentalist leaders as “not enough *fun*, too much *damn*, too little *mental*.” Rather than engaging the ideas of fundamentalists, it was easier to relegate them to playing stock characters in Hollywood double features: the Bible-thumping revivalist, the hayseed preacher, the storefront church on the edge of town that was filled with rubes and yokels.

Caricature or not, this was a life that Ernest Pickering knew. He was reared by devout parents, Salvation Army evangelists, who recruited their nine-year-old son to play bass drum in the revivalist band. He was quickly promoted to playing first trumpet, but once he reached high school, Pickering became a street-corner evangelist, “dodging rock throwers and tomato throwers,” as he put it. Leaving home at sixteen, he spent his college years at Bob Jones University.

On the weekends, he and his friends would take the train to dusty southern outposts. Their first stop was usually the tavern, the center of a town's social life. Convincing the owner to hold a revival meeting, they'd clear off the pool table and lead the crowd in hymn singing before preaching the gospel.

"Don't go to seminary, Ernie—it will ruin you," was the advice that Bob Jones Sr. gave Ernest Pickering upon graduation in 1947. But Pickering moved to Dallas, Texas, and enrolled in Dallas Theological Seminary. Old-time revivalists such as Jones were intensely worried that a theological education would spoil a preacher's evangelistic fervor, but times were changing. Historic fundamentalism probably never deserved the "not enough mental" accusations (its early leaders were generally trained in accredited colleges and seminaries), but such charges became especially spurious with the postwar rush that filled graduate schools with young, bright thinkers such as Pickering.

He became a student of Lewis Sperry Chafer, who had just completed an eight-volume *Systematic Theology*, which showed that premillennialism was more than a cynical response to a mechanized age. Rather, it could be articulated in terms of a fully developed theology that would unite a good deal of fundamentalism around theological ideas (rather than their supposed affinity for antimodern social values).

Chafer had lived a life that didn't quite fit the fundamentalist profile: he was a pastor-theologian who cut his teeth as a traveling evangelist, a mission board executive who was also a college professor, an academic who still believed firmly in Biblical inerrancy. Following his mentor's lead, Pickering would also become a pastor, a mission board executive, a college professor, and a college president. And Pickering would also come to write a book that became the standard defense of fundamentalist ideas.

The issue of ecclesiastical separation was an often-discussed topic during Pickering's seminary years. No one questioned that many denominations were filled with modernists who openly denied basic truths of the Bible, but what to do about it was hotly debated. Should we come out or stay in? Is it better to stay within an increasingly apostate church

denomination, or should one withdraw and start over? Chafer, having suffered his own heartaches within a Presbyterian denomination overrun by liberals, had qualms about staying in—but he was also suspicious of those who sought to leave.

“The problem with separatist groups,” Chafer advised his students, “is that they have decreed that the only way to deal with modernism is to sacrifice your influence by getting out.” Chafer offered his students the same solution he had heard as a young man: he advocated expository preaching as the primary method for combating apostasy.

“Never descend to mere controversy,” C. I. Scofield had said to Chafer in 1921. “You have no time or strength for that. Give out the positive Word. Nothing can stand before it.”

Admirable as it was, the Scofield ideal of positive expository preaching underwent an ironic twist as Chafer’s students began ministering. The process of preaching through passages of Scripture led many of them to conclude that not every part of the Bible was positive. In fact, expository preaching led many of the young Dallas graduates to conclude that the correct response to apostasy was separation.

This was Ernest Pickering’s journey. He began as a street-corner preacher for the Salvation Army, was ordained a Southern Baptist, and was then trained by nondenominational fundamentalists. In his early ministry he affiliated with a nondenominational group; then a Conservative Baptist seminary; then the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches. He knew and lived the personal cost of ecclesiastical separation—the misplaced accusations, the strained friendships, the tense board meetings. With each transition he was confronted with the brewing question that would not go away: What if the modern evangelical church were to be evaluated by its own developing standard of pragmatism? If the “stay in” approach was better than the “come out” approach, *why didn’t it work?*

In 1969 Ernest Pickering moved from a pastorate in Kokomo, Indiana, and reentered the academic world. A few months before he became academic dean of Baptist Bible College (Clarks Summit, Pennsylvania), he preached what would become a famous sermon on Biblical separation

for the annual meetings of the GARBC. Rising to the presidency of BBC, he would spend the next decade studying the issue at length, writing shorter articles, and patiently answering the pesky questions of seminar-ians who often wished for a convenient shortcut to Biblical discernment. During this time, Pickering developed a series of lectures that traced the idea of ecclesiastical separation through church history.

At one such lecture to a group of college students in 1977, Dr. Pickering suggested that there was no cut-and-dried approach to the practice of Biblical separation. “What we’d like to have is a textbook with handy reference to give us the divine word on all these subjects,” Pickering said. “Well, I don’t have such a textbook. I wish I did sometimes. I can only raise some questions and offer Biblical principles to answer them.”

This lack of a textbook would soon be addressed. Pickering had prepared bundles of notes that he sold at his lectures for fifty cents each. These became the rough chapters for the first edition of *Biblical Separation*. Major work on the book continued through the spring of 1978, with the kind support of his colleagues at Baptist Bible College. While he was writing, his unresolved tension between preaching and teaching surfaced in a surprising way: He left BBC to become pastor of Emmanuel Baptist Church (Toledo, Ohio), where he finished the final draft of the book. When the first edition rolled off the presses in the spring of 1979, it was already sold out.

The beauty of *Biblical Separation* is its magisterial scope. Pickering wrote an unapologetic overview precisely at the same time that many academic historians were rejecting the notion of grand, all-encompassing explanations for historical events. Pickering’s history is unified by a theological idea: that every era of church history has been marked by apostasy and the struggle for a pure church.

While *Biblical Separation* was being released, George Marsden was finishing another history, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, tracing the development of the movement through 1925. Marsden wrote from outside the movement but offered many insights—some affirming, some penetrating—regarding the rise of fundamentalism. But the two books

were like ships passing in the night. Pickering's analysis, leaning heavily on historical theology and Bible exposition, described a different side of the movement than Marsden, who emphasized the social forces during America's transition from agrarian to urban lifestyles. As a result, many scholars continued to miss a key concept: American fundamentalism was more than a product of its time; it was a theological struggle.

The two books ignited a flood of work from both sides of the fence. Academics continued to refine their research about fundamentalism's relationship to American culture, and theologians continued to refine their beliefs about the nature of the church and the content of the gospel. At times, the conversation between the groups was civil and offered moments of rare insight. Marsden himself later noted how the meaning of the word "fundamentalist" changed after the 1930s: "The change in terminology was gradual; but by the 1960s 'fundamentalist' usually meant separatists and no longer included the many conservatives in mainline denominations."

This was the heart of the issue—the crucial theological concept that motivated the developing movement. With the publication of *Biblical Separation*, Dr. Pickering unwittingly wrote himself into the history of fundamentalism. All who study the movement after him must now interact with his ideas or be left with mere social analysis.

After the publication of *Biblical Separation*, Pickering absorbed many more ideas as he interacted with a new generation of young preachers—some of whom were raised within fundamentalism and were the sons of its leaders, but who moved to a broader evangelical approach. When they peppered Pickering with questions, they often asked for more Bible exposition about ecclesiastical separation. In response, Pickering continued to write, but these articles and pamphlets did not receive as wide a distribution as his original text.

This was the motivation for offering an updated edition to *Biblical Separation*. Our goal was not to introduce outside material defending Pickering's position; rather, we wished to allow Pickering's view to be explained as completely and clearly as possible by his own later work. Along the way, we have also updated the footnotes, bibliography, and

subject index. In certain places where later authors have illuminated Pickering's ideas, we have suggested additional resources in bracketed footnotes to indicate editorial additions. Minor edits were made to conform to the changing rules of grammar and punctuation. Some details have merited judicious updates: organizational names change, affiliations change, and some who were living in 1979 have now earned a past-tense verb.

We believe those who are familiar with the first edition will be interested to see the effect of Dr. Pickering's later writings. For instance, Dr. Pickering sometimes expressed impatience with the term "secondary separation," while continuing to defend the idea of separating from other Christians when necessary. And, his brooding grief over the tragedy of separation will surprise those who speak of "fighting fundamentalists." One other detail bears noting: Dr. Pickering's practical advice about the heart attitudes of a separatist would have saved us a lot of grief, had we listened.

Myron Houghton has contributed chapter 10, "Separation Issues since Ecumenical Evangelism in the 1970s," in which he brings Dr. Pickering's history forward to our present era. Publishers often struggle to find the best way to update works that are based on recent historical analysis—which this book is. Dr. Pickering did not believe that the struggle for a pure church would be resolved in his own lifetime; rather, he believed it would continue "until the Head of the church returns." So we are grateful for this additional chapter, written by a former student of Dr. Pickering, which explores developments since the 1979 edition.

Around the office we accord *Biblical Separation* a place of high honor. To be sure, every publisher dreams of having a title continuously in print for thirty years—and for small denominational presses such as ours, this is extremely rare. But we consider this book to be more than just a publishing milestone. It is valuable because it addresses a core value that defines and unites those who believe in a pure church. So our work as caretakers of this updated edition has been an honor and labor of love. *Soli Deo Gloria.*

Kevin Mungons

Introduction

TO THE 1979 EDITION

WHEN THE LORD JESUS CHRIST returned to Heaven, He instituted upon this earth conclaves of His people—churches. They constitute the “called-out ones,” Heaven’s representatives on earth. Each congregation is to reflect the holy character of the One Who is its Head. But the prince of darkness, Satan, has other plans. He has sought from the beginning to hinder the witness of the churches by contaminating them with unholy doctrine and unholy people. At an early date the Devil’s efforts were evident in the professing church. Corruption, sacramentalism, and formalism set in, replacing the spiritual vitality that had characterized the Apostolic Age. From that time until the present, many of God’s people, living in different ages and under varying circumstances, have sought to maintain the purity of doctrine and practice that is set forth in Christ’s standard for His churches—the New Testament.

This is the story of a struggle. The struggle will not end until the Head of the church returns. Those who struggle have been and are imperfect human beings; hence they never have and never will produce the perfect church. Those who struggle have personal quirks, human biases, and manifest weaknesses. Yet they press on to perpetuate on earth congregations of believers that are pleasing to the Lord and are pure testimonies of His saving grace. This book does not defend the notion that all separatists are worthy of emulation, nor does it maintain the position that all nonseparatists are completely devoid of spiritual insight. People who truly love Christ and have been a blessing to the church at large can be found

in both camps. We seek in these pages to pursue, illustrate, and defend what we believe to be a Scriptural principle, that of separation from evil.

For centuries the struggle has gone on. It was seen in the Donatist controversy, the witness of obscure groups in the Middle Ages seeking to battle deep-seated error, and the sufferings and testimony of the Anabaptists. It was seen in the convictions of the separatist Puritans, the battles of separatists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the continuing battles of separatists in this century. While there are among separatists (as among other believers) those who are self-seeking, petty, and spiteful, the separatist testimony as a whole does not spring from such personal weaknesses but rather from a sincere desire on the part of large numbers of believers to obey the Word of God and honor the Savior. Particularly since the height of the fundamentalist-modernist controversy in the early twentieth century, a rather substantial separatist movement has emerged in the United States, as well as to a lesser extent in many other places of the world.

A new generation of separatists has arisen. These have had no personal involvement in the controversies that produced the contemporary separatist movement. To them “modernism” (religious liberalism) is only a term. They have not engaged in hand-to-hand combat with the enemy. Moreover, they live in a day when such combat is decried by many who urge Christians to forget their differences and press on to more constructive activities and concerns. It is all too possible for separatists to become complacent, to be enamored with the current call to peace with its accompanying plea for a cessation of hostilities, and to gradually lose the sensitivity to error and the will to stand against it. Hopefully, the material in this book will be both a warning against such complacency and an encouragement to stand true for God.

The separatist position, to some, represents merely human reaction to certain circumstances. They neither see nor understand the theological and Biblical principles involved. Separatism, they say, has its roots in the perversity of overzealous persons who have unrealistic aims. If this be true, then separatism is a dishonor to God. If, however, as I believe,

separatism rests upon clear Scriptural mandates, then it has justification for its existence.

The totality of Biblical separation includes the concept of personal separation. This volume, however, deals only with what is commonly called “ecclesiastical separation,” the principle of separation as applied to the nature and associations of the visible churches. Biblical separation is the implementation of the Scriptural teaching that demands repudiation of any conscious or continuing fellowship with those who deny the doctrines of the historic Christian faith, especially as such fellowship finds expression in organized ecclesiastical structures, and which results in the establishment and nurture of local congregations of believers who are free from contaminating alliances.

Ernest Pickering, 1978
Toledo, Ohio

The Early Conflict: Donatism vs. Catholicism

Nonseparatists tend to protect the existing order, find excuses for it, and argue for its purification and continuation even as it progressively grows worse. Separatists, on the other hand, desire the establishment of new and fresh witnesses to God's Word.

NO SOONER had Christ established His church on earth than Satan set out to corrupt it. He raised up false ministers (2 Cor. 11:13) to preach a false gospel (Gal. 1:6–9) and thus produce false disciples (Matt. 13:25). Such activity immediately raises some important questions: What are the marks of the true church of Christ? To what extent is sound doctrine necessary to a true church? When has an ecclesiastical body departed from the faith? If such departure is evident, what should be done by those who seek to preserve the truth?

The impression is sometimes received that such questions—and the inevitable conflicts that surround their debate—are confined to the so-called “fundamentalist-modernist controversy” of the twentieth century, and that “separatism” (renunciation of fellowship with apostates) is largely a contemporary phenomenon spawned by overzealous fundamentalists. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Conflicts over the purity of the

church have rocked the church down through the centuries. Every age has had those who were concerned about the church's departure from Scriptural truth and who sought to perpetuate, by one means or another, churches of sound witness to the saving gospel of Christ.

By at least the second century, movements developed within the organized church protesting its impurity and doctrinal drift.

FORERUNNERS OF THE DONATISTS

Montanists

Shortly after the middle of the second century, a man in Phrygia named Montanus proclaimed himself a prophet. He and his followers began emphasizing a pure church and the immediate power of the Holy Spirit. They gave special attention to the second coming of Christ. As in so many movements, various forms and levels of fanaticism were found in Montanism, particularly as it appeared in Asia Minor. However, not all of its emphases can be dismissed as fanaticism.

Tertullian was the chief scholarly representative of Montanism as it appeared in the Western church. His writings reflect a deep concern for a more spiritual church. He and his followers called themselves the "pneumatics" as contrasted to the "psychical" (carnal) church. They viewed each believer as a priest who had the right of direct dealing with God.

Tertullian actually began to manifest Montanist tendencies in his latter writings; for example, "On Monogamy," "On the Apparel of Women," and "On Fasting." These discussions do not center around ecclesiology, but rather on a rigorous view of the Christian life that was characteristic of the Montanists.

As far as Montanus himself is concerned, we have little to go on except reports by his enemies. Frederic Farrar declared that Montanus's basic orthodoxy and that of his followers was not questioned, but that the movement went astray in adopting the view that God was giving prophetic messages and that prophecy was impossible without somnambulism and trance. Fanaticism set in with the acceptance of this view and was apparently the downfall of this movement. "It is beginning to be

widely recognized that in many of its aspects Montanism was an honest and earnest effort to restore the discipline and practices of primitive Christianity.”¹ The Montanists’ concerns soon led to the formation of separate Montanist churches in the East. However, in the Western church they continued longer within the framework of Catholicism, though finally a separation did take place.

Novatians

One of the early periods of suffering for Christians was known as the Decian persecutions (AD 249–250). During this time a goodly number of professing Christians apostatized and did not stand true to their convictions. At the conclusion of the persecutions, the churches debated whether they should welcome these “lapsed” persons back into church fellowship. The Roman bishop Novatian, along with others, took a strict view and declared that those who had denied the Lord should not be reinstated into church fellowship. Basically, he and his followers were contending for a stricter view of the requirements for church membership than was generally accepted in his day. Already a looser and more accommodating approach to church membership was popular. Novatian stood opposed to such accommodation.

As a result of the contentions of Novatian, a separatist body was formed, which continued for centuries. The movement “came to be a separatist church group parallel with the orthodox [Catholic] church.”² Philip Schaff well described their position when he wrote, “The Novatianists considered themselves the only pure communion, and unchurched all churches which defiled themselves by readmitting the lapsed, or any other gross offender.”³ Someone has referred to Novatian as the “antipope” of the “Puritan party” within the church.⁴

Cyprian’s answer to the Novatians

Following the Decian persecutions and the problems just mentioned, Cyprian, the bishop of Carthage (circa AD 250), wrote one of his best-known works, *The Unity of the Catholic Church*. While some scholars

disagree, it is probable that it was written against the Novatians. Certainly the sentiments expressed were contrary to Novatianism. In the book Cyprian set forth a strong view of the church that was later developed by others into the official Catholic view. He emphasized that the unity of the church was in its hierarchy: “The authority of the bishops forms a unity, of which each holds his part in its totality.”⁵ He argued strongly against any schism in the church.

The spouse of Christ cannot be defiled, she is inviolate and chaste. . . . Whoever breaks with the Church and enters on an adulterous union, cuts himself off from the promises made to the Church, and he who has turned his back on the Church of Christ shall not come to the rewards of Christ; he is an alien, a worldling, an enemy. You cannot have God for your Father, if you have not the Church for your mother. . . . Whoever breaks the peace and harmony of Christ acts against Christ; whoever gathers elsewhere than in the Church, scatters the Church of Christ.⁶

Cyprian used a plea for unity against separatists. He said: “God is one, and Christ is one, and His Church is one; one in the faith, and one the people cemented together by harmony into the strong unity of a body. . . . Nothing that is separated from the parent stock can ever live or breathe apart; all hope of salvation is lost.”⁷

He also accused separatists of lack of love. Speaking of Christ, he wrote, “Unity and love together He taught with the weight of His authority. . . . But what unity is maintained, what love practiced, or even imagined, by one who, mad with the frenzy of discord, splits the Church.”⁸

THE HISTORICAL SETTING OF THE DONATIST STRUGGLE

The ideals of the Montanists and the Novatians were not entirely lost; they continued to find lodging in the hearts of others in the ensuing centuries. Early in the fourth century a conflict within the African church recalled the conflict that spawned Novatianism. In the so-called Diocletian persecutions under the hand of mighty Rome, numbers of professing

believers had renounced their faith. Some felt strongly that believers who had renounced their faith should not be received into church fellowship. Some church bishops and members of their flocks had succumbed to government edicts in order to maintain their personal safety. They had not stood courageously for the faith; thus they were suspect in the eyes of those who desired a more uncompromising testimony.

The matter came to a head (from an ecclesiastical standpoint) with the consecration of Caecilian as bishop of Carthage in AD 312. His consecration to this office was opposed by numbers of bishops and other leaders because one of his “consecrators” was guilty of *traditio*, that is, the surrender or betrayal of the Scriptures during the preceding times of persecution. They believed, therefore, that Caecilian was “tainted,” not fit to hold a position of leadership. The point of debate merely reflected some deeper, underlying issues. What is a true church? To what extent should the purity of the church be sought and protected? The established church tended to be less strict in its demands. The opposition party that first formed under a bishop named Majorinus (AD 312) and was later led by his successor, Donatus, was committed to the concept that church purity is extremely important.

The separatist body that began to form grew rapidly. Its adherents were known as Donatists after the bishop who became its chief spokesman. Donatist churches multiplied in North Africa. They became a considerable force in the third and fourth centuries. They operated independently of the established church and became the first large and important separatist body. Religious historian Augustus Neander saw a similarity between Donatism and Novatianism: “This schism may be compared in many respects with that of Novatian in the preceding period. In this, too, we see the conflict, for example, of Separatism with Catholicism.”⁹

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE STRUGGLE

Some historians see primarily social and political forces behind the rise of Donatism.¹⁰ While such forces were undoubtedly in play, far more

was involved in the struggles of the Donatists. W. H. C. Frend, who authored a definitive work on the subject, put it this way: "From an early stage there emerge two completely different interpretations of Christianity. On the one hand, there is the orthodox Catholic Church, prepared to compromise with the evils of this world for the sake of unity and peaceful progress. . . . On the other hand, there is the Church of the Holy Spirit, of enthusiasm, of open hostility to the world, individualistic and intolerant."¹¹

If this assessment is correct, then the Donatist controversy is of intense interest to all students of church history. It is rightly said that the "permanent interest of Donatism is in the theological issues involved."¹²

The Donatists were biblicists; that is, they had a high view of Scripture (though, unhappily, not without errors spawned by ancient Catholicism). "Martyrdom and devotion to the Word of God in the Bible was the heart of Donatism."¹³ The established church, while seeking to employ Scriptural defense where possible, did not hesitate in its defense against the Donatists to call upon tradition and "the established order of things" as a valid argument for maintaining the status quo. They were "accommodationists" for the sake of peace. On the other hand, the Donatists were purists. "One of the most striking features of African Christianity in the third century was its uncompromising hostility to the institution of the Roman Empire. . . . The sharpest of contrasts was drawn between the Church and the pagan world."¹⁴

In the conflict with Donatism, important and lasting theological concepts were hammered out. They have affected the church for the remaining centuries. It was on the anvil of this battle that the foundations of the Roman Catholic Church were laid.

Donatism represents an attempt . . . to resist the process of secularization by which the Church was gradually transformed from a community of holy persons into an institution of mixed character, offering to secure salvation for its members by means of grace over which it had control. . . . It was met by the defenders of Catholicism with a new emphasis on the objective character of the sacraments, and upon the holiness of the Church apart from

the holiness or otherwise of its members and clergy. It was in the controversy with the Donatists, therefore, that the Catholic doctrine of the Church was completely developed.¹⁵

THE PARTICULAR ISSUES

As we shall see is true with many other movements, it is difficult to obtain the whole picture of Donatism from available sources. Many scholars have noted that it is not easy to draw up a complete account of the entire Donatist controversy because “none of the original sources has survived and all later documents are products of the opposing party.”¹⁶ Sufficient evidence has been found, however, to enable us to discern some of the major issues.

The necessity of stricter requirements for church membership

Generally speaking, separatist bodies through the centuries have contended for a high view of the meaning of church membership. Albert Henry Newman stated, “The fundamental question discussed in the debate . . . concerned the holiness of the Church as conditioned by the moral state of its members.”¹⁷ The Catholic Church contended then (through Augustine) and still does to this day that the church’s holiness exists whether or not its members are holy. The Donatists, on the other hand, believed that “every church which tolerated unworthy members in its bosom was itself polluted by the communion with them” and it thus “ceased to be a true Christian church.”¹⁸ They were concerned not only about local congregational purity, but also that this purity not be compromised by impure fellowships; thus they refused to fellowship with the existing Catholic churches.

The fact and extent of apostasy in the established church

We find among the Donatists a view of church apostasy that continued through the Dark Ages among separatist bodies. The professing church had fallen into apostasy, had repudiated vital Christian doctrine, and was thus under God’s judgment. Donatists believed that the church

had fallen in the days of Constantine and that it was their duty to reconstitute the church, to begin again to establish it on earth.¹⁹

The Donatists were strong in their denunciations of the established Catholic Church. “In the great imperial church, embracing the people in a mass, they saw a secularized Babylon.”²⁰ In their preaching the Donatist bishops spoke of the corruption of the church, and they generally assigned the cause of that corruption to the confusion between the church and state.

The necessity of godly ministers

The heart of the Donatist controversy centered around whether or not a church can be a true church if its ministers and people are not living godly lives. The Donatists argued that the validity of the sacraments depends upon the worthiness of those who administer them. Since the established Catholic Church tolerated, yes, approved, unworthy ministers, the sacraments administered in that church were not valid and acceptable, according to Donatists. They said that the Scriptures demand that those who serve the Lord and lead His people be holy. To what extent the Donatists understood clearly the doctrine of justification by faith is debatable. Unfortunately, we have practically nothing from their own hand to tell us what they believed. From evidence at hand, however, we believe the following analysis to be accurate:

This demand for purity on the part of those holding ecclesiastical office was the central concern of the Donatists. For a church which tolerates deniers and traitors in its midst cannot possibly be the true church of Jesus Christ; hence it cannot possess the true sacraments. The validity of the sacraments and of every ecclesiastical act therefore not only depends upon the worthiness of the servants who administer them, but also is destroyed if they are administered in a church which does not excommunicate clerics suspected of having denied the faith.²¹

The Catholic party, led by Augustine, declared that the holiness of the church is intrinsic and does not reside in its ministers or members.

THE DONATIST VIEW OF THE CHURCH

It is in the area of ecclesiology, the doctrine of the church, that the Donatist controversy centered. The Donatists believed the true church was to be a fellowship of the saints, separate from false churches, separate from the state.

Fellowship of the saints

The Donatists believed that people should have a personal relationship to the Lord in order to be members of a church. Their protest was the first of a long series of protests against the notion that the church comprises all who make some sort of profession and live within a certain geographical area.

Separate from false churches

At this point we should take special note, because the Donatists dealt with an issue that is still with us today. If a visible church has departed from the faith, should Christians remain within it? The Donatists said no. Separatist bodies who have followed them have given the same answer. Historian Johann Lorenz Von Mosheim, quoted by Walter Nigg, faulted them for their view. But in doing so, he gave us an excellent summary of the truth for which they contended.

That the Donatists were sound in doctrine, their adversaries admit; nor were their lives censurable, if we except the enormities of the *Circumcelliones*, which were detested by the greatest part of the Donatists. Their fault was that they regarded the African church as having fallen from the rank and privileges of a true church, and as being destitute of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, in consequence of its adherence to Caecelian. . . . And all other churches also which united the communed [those who had received Communion, i.e., Christians] with [those] of Africa, they looked upon as defiled and polluted; and believed themselves alone, on account of the sanctity of their bishops, merited the name of the true, pure, and holy church; and, in consequence of these opinions, they avoided all communion with other churches in order to escape defilement.²²

Separate from the state

Separatist bodies have tended to hold to the separation of the church and state. The very nature of the separatist position tends to guarantee this view, since it champions a free and a pure church, but the Reformers did not embrace this doctrine. And, insofar as they were separatists from Rome, the premise just stated would not hold. But the Reformers were not thoroughgoing and consistent separatists. Their sworn enemies, the Anabaptists, saw the issue much more clearly.

The Donatists believed that the union between church and state effected under the Roman emperor Constantine was detrimental to the church's spiritual well-being. Their aim, in contrast to that of the Catholics, was "to bring out again from the dead mass of simply baptized Christians, the pure Church of the regenerate; to substitute, in a word, the Christian communion for an ecclesiastical corporation. . . . The Donatists saw that the unity and freedom of the Church were imperiled by its union with the State, and they declared against the State-Church doctrine."²³

The significance of Donatism for separatists is simply this: The Donatists championed a pure church, a church that was intolerant of the elements that would contaminate it. One of the Donatists' chief emphases was the holiness of the church. While some writers (such as Neander) repeatedly accuse them of "separatist pride," it was the genuine concern of the Donatists to pattern the church after the apostolic model. As is true of everyone else who has had this goal, they fell short of its accomplishment. Their aims, however, were admirable. In their controversy with Augustine, one of the major differences between separatists and inclusivists became clear. Separatists give priority to the *holiness* of the church; inclusivists, such as Augustine, give priority to the *unity* of the church. This is not to say that either is completely unconcerned about the other attribute, but the emphasis that they give governs the attitude toward the church as a whole and its relationships. Philip Schaff, noted historian, gave a fine analysis of the essence of the controversy between the Catholics and the Donatists that serves to highlight current lines of conflict between separatists and nonseparatists.

The Donatist controversy was a conflict between separatism and catholicism; between ecclesiastical purism and ecclesiastical eclecticism; between the idea of the church as an exclusive community of regenerate saints and the idea of the church as the general Christendom of state and people. . . .

The Donatists, like Tertullian in his Montanistic writings, started from an ideal and spiritualistic conception of the church as a fellowship of the saints. . . .

In opposition to this subjective and spiritualistic theory of the church, Augustine, as champion of the Catholics, developed [different principles].²⁴

AUGUSTINE'S ATTACK UPON DONATISM

With Donatism on the rise and the Donatists' numbers multiplying, the established Catholic Church needed someone of ability to take up the cudgels against them. A capable man was found: Augustine, bishop of Hippo. His name has gone down in the annals of church history as one of the great church fathers. Theological concepts that he propounded are still the basis of some contemporary theological systems. He is admired for the great truths that he championed, many of which would be accepted by orthodox Christians today. But in fairness we must also recall (albeit painfully) the serious errors that originated with him as well. We thank God for all spiritual truth, for that comes from the Holy Scriptures. We repudiate errors because they are not of God and are not found in His Word.

Augustine wrote at some length in various treatises against the Donatists and their teachings. Many of the arguments he employed against the separatists of his day are still being used by anti-separatists today. What were some of them?

His defense of the holy Catholic Church as the true church

Augustine rejected the purist concept of the church held by the Donatists. He argued that the true church possessed episcopal succession,

and that severance from the visible Catholic Church meant severance from the true church. In writing of the Donatists, he said, “Let them have a bitter sorrow for their former detestable wrong-doing, as Peter had for his cowardly lie, and let them come to the true Church, that is, their Catholic mother.”²⁵ The Catholic Church alone possessed the marks of a true church, he said. Thus he laid the foundation for the apologetic that the defenders of the Roman Catholic system later used effectively. In response to the argument that the Donatists were living more godly lives than many of the run-of-the-mill professors of that day, he replied, “Whoever, therefore, shall be separated from this Catholic Church by this single sin of being severed from the unity of Christ, no matter how estimable a life he may imagine he is living, shall not have life, but the anger of God rests upon him.”²⁶

While Augustine used some Scripture in seeking to refute the Donatists, his argument for the nature of the church is built more upon a plea for “apostolical tradition, church usage, custom, testimony, and authority.” The perpetuation of the status quo and reverence for tradition and established order have often characterized the opponents of separatist movements. Frensdorff has well described the significance of the conflict between the Donatists and Augustine at this point: “Two contradictory interpretations of the Christian message took root. The germs of Catholicism and Dissent, the authority of an institution as against the authority of the Bible or personal inspiration, existed from the earliest moments of the Christian Church.”²⁷

The same problem has repeatedly recurred through the centuries. Nonseparatists tend to protect the existing order, find excuses for it, and argue for its purification and continuation even as it progressively grows worse. Separatists, on the other hand, desire the establishment of new and fresh witnesses to God’s Word.

His appeal for unity and love

Augustine, like many after him, viewed the separatist Donatists as the bad guys. They were the “troublers of Israel,” the “church-splitters.”

Numerous times in his writings he mentioned the uncharitable spirit that characterized all those who would leave the Catholic Church. He pled for a mind that had “spit out all the bitterness of division, and which loves the sweetness of charity.”²⁸ In another place Augustine invited the Donatists to “agree to the peace and unity of Christ,” to repent of their sins, and to return to their “Head, Christ, in the Catholic peace, where ‘Charity covereth a multitude of sins.’”²⁹ He also appealed to the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper as a sign of unity. “For, the one bread is the sacrament of unity. . . . Therefore the Catholic Church alone is the Body of Christ. . . . But the enemy of unity has no share in the divine charity.”³⁰

No number of appeals to love can be a proper basis for disobeying God in an unholy alliance. Love obeys God. Augustine did not emphasize this truth.

His argument from the wheat and tares

One of Augustine’s favorite Scriptures to use against the Donatists was the parable of the wheat and the tares (Matt. 13:24–30). He deduced from this parable that since the wheat and the tares should grow together until harvest (the end of the world), we have no right to try to separate them in this age, but rather should let them grow together in the church until the Lord Himself divides them. This argument appears many times in his writings.

As to those whom we are not able to amend, even if necessity requires, for the salvation of others, that they share the sacraments of God with us, it does not require us to share in their sins, which we should do by consenting to or condoning them. We tolerate them in this world, in which the Catholic Church is spread abroad among all nations, which the Lord called His field, like the cockle among the wheat, or on this threshingfloor of unity, like chaff mingled with the good grain; or in the nets of the word and the sacrament, like the bad fishes enclosed with the good. We have them until the time of harvest. . . . Let us not destroy ourselves in evil dissension, because of evil men.³¹

He wrote in another letter that we should “bear with the chaff on the threshingfloor and, because it is destined for the fire at some future time, we do not for that abandon the Lord’s threshingfloor.”³²

His defense of the persecution of heretics

To Augustine, Donatists were heretics. They complained to him and other authorities of the Catholic Church about the unjust persecution they suffered. It is true that the Donatists were persecuted by the Catholics. Donatist property was confiscated, and some of their churches were closed. “The Catholic Church’s first great and inhuman persecution against other Christians was against the Donatist free church.”³³ How did Augustine justify this persecution? He felt it was perfectly proper for extraordinary measures, yes, forceful measures, to be used against those who had departed from the “true church.”

Why, then, should the Church not compel her lost sons to return if the lost sons have compelled others to be lost? . . . Is it not part of the shepherd’s care when he has found those sheep, which have not been rudely snatched away, but have been gently coaxed and led astray from the flock, and have begun to be claimed by others, to call them back to the Lord’s sheepfold, by threats, or pain of blows if they try to resist? . . . As the Donatists . . . claim that they ought not to be forced into the good . . . the Church imitates her Lord in forcing them.³⁴

EVALUATIONS

Important, lasting, and Scriptural lessons can be learned from the Donatist controversy. The Donatists were not models of theological or personal perfection. We are not claiming such. Nor are we pleading that all the views they held be adopted by contemporary believers. But where they stood for a Scriptural principle, we should take note and be instructed. They believed that God wanted a pure testimony on earth. They believed that men and women associated with a church should live exemplary lives. They believed that the state has no right to interfere in the church’s business. They denounced the apostasy and impurity that

characterized much of the visible church in their day. Donatism represents an early example of separatism. In Donatism were the seeds of later separatist movements. So strong was the memory of these Donatists that later separatist bodies such as the Waldensians and the Anabaptists were often described as Donatists. They stood for a principle—which we will proceed to trace, as possible, through the Dark Ages.³⁵

Notes

1. Frederic Farrar, *Lives of the Fathers* (Edinburgh: Black, 1889), 1:183.
2. Gunnar Westin, *The Free Church through the Ages* (Nashville: Broadman, 1958), 17.
3. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1910), 1:91.
4. H. D. McDonald, "Novatianism," *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 717.
5. Maurice Bevenot, trans., *St. Cyprian* (London: Longmans, Green, 1957), 47.
6. *Ibid.*, 52, 53.
7. *Ibid.*, 65.
8. *Ibid.*, 58.
9. Augustus Neander, *General History of the Christian Religion and Church*, trans. Joseph Torrey (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1871), 2:216.
10. R. A. Markus, "Christianity and Dissent in Roman North Africa: Changing Perspectives in Recent Work," in *Schism, Heresy, and Religious Protest*, ed. Derek Baker (Cambridge University Press, 1972).
11. W. H. C. Frend, *The Donatist Church* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1952), 112, 113.
12. "Donatism," *Westminster Dictionary of Church History*, 275.
13. Frend, *The Donatist Church*, 319.
14. *Ibid.*, 106.
15. C. A. Scott, "Donatists," *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, 3:844, 845.
16. Walter Nigg, *The Heretics*, ed. and trans. Richard Winston and Clara Winston (New York: Knopf, 1962), 110.
17. Albert Henry Newman, "Donatism," *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, 3:488.
18. Neander, *General History*, 2:238.

19. Leonard Verduin, *The Reformers and Their Stepchildren* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 40.
20. Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 1:153, 154.
21. Nigg, *The Heretics*, 112.
22. *Ibid.*, 113.
23. "Donatists," *Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*, 2:863.
24. Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 1:153, 154.
25. Augustine, Letter 185, *The Fathers of the Church*, ed. Joseph Deferrari (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1953), 30:185.
26. *Ibid.*, Letter 141, 20:139.
27. Frend, *The Donatist Church*, 333.
28. Augustine, Letter 142, 20:149.
29. Augustine, Letter 141, 20:146.
30. Augustine, Letter 185, 30:189.
31. Augustine, Letter 238, 18:209, 210.
32. Augustine, Letter 142, 2:149.
33. Westin, *The Free Church through the Ages*, 22.
34. Augustine, Letter 185, 30:164, 165.
35. [In addition to the sources cited by Pickering, authors have continued to explore the separatism of the Donatist movement. See Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*. 4th ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 424, 25; Maureen A. Tilley, *The Bible in Christian North Africa: The Donatist World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997); Harry O. Maier "Religious Dissent, Heresy and Households in Late Antiquity" *Vigiliae Christianae* 49, no. 1 (March 1995), 49–63; and Maureen A. Tilley, "Dilatory Donatists or Procrastinating Catholics: The Trial at the Conference of Carthage" *Church History* 60, no. 1 (March 1991), 7–19.]