

Early Church Heresies – 5. Novationists and Donatists

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How forgiving are you? Do you love forgiving others? Would you rather make them suffer for a bit to earn any relief? Or do you never forgive? The gospel gives a high priority to forgiveness. We are forgiven by trusting in Christ. He was hung on the cross so we might be forgiven. But are there limits apart from the 70x7? What about really serious cases, like when a high profile minister falls... how should we handle the problem?

In 250AD, the Roman Emperor Decius ordered the persecution of all Christians. As a result of this persecution, some very prominent Christians were jailed, and Fabianus (Bishop of Rome) was killed. But to avoid the persecution, many Christians, including some bishops and priests, denied Christ.

When the persecution slowed in 251AD, people came back. Christians asked, "Should ministers who committed apostasy by denying Christ, should they be allowed back into the church?"

Novation was a priest in Rome, who survived the persecution. He quoted verses like Matthew 10:32-33 Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven. On that basis, Novation said that there should be no admitting of anyone back into the church.

In 251, Novation missed out on becoming the new bishop of Rome, so he and his followers split off from the main church to form a rival church with more discipline. After a few years, it was obvious that this split-off group was failing, so many of the Novationists rejoined the main church.

However, a great debate raged in Rome, between Stephen the bishop of Rome, and Cyprian, the bishop of Carthage. Stephen said that those who were baptised by the Novationist priests had a valid baptism and should be accepted without re-baptising them. Cyprian though, wanted any splinter group baptism re-done by the official church.

The question of the time was not whether the Novationists were heretical over any theological view they held. Rather it was because they had split from the main church.

In our day and time, with so many splitting of churches, and the setting up of community churches, charismatic churches, evangelical churches etc, the debate may seem a bit foreign to us. But it was not that long ago that the Australian

Anglican church required the re-confirmation of Christians who had switched from the Presbyterian Church. We still do not accept the ordination from other Protestant churches.

The lenient view of Stephen, bishop of Rome, won the day. He argued that baptism belongs to Christ, and not to the church. The standing of the person baptising someone is not the relevant issue. They accepted that if the person was baptised in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, then that person's baptism was valid.

That is also why the Anglican church will not re-baptise anyone who has been baptised appropriately, whether as a child, or in another Christian church. That person's baptism is taken to be valid.

But the harsh cause of Novation against those who denied Christ, and Cyprian's call to rebaptise Christians came back.

In Carthage, North Africa, in 311, Archdeacon Caecilianus was consecrated by a bishop who was thought to have denied Christ during the persecution under Emperor Diocletian. In response, some hard-liners set up a rival bishop in 311, and replaced him with Bishop Donatus in 315AD.

This breakaway church was orthodox in most of its teachings, however it was more strict in its discipline. They pointed to the weakness of the main church, which easily forgave and allowed moral lapses to be lightly punished. The Donatists claimed to be the only true church.

They had a remarkable lack of grace. They didn't use these words, but their ministry position was characterised by the words "God might forgive you, but I won't!" Discipline was vital. If there was a taint about a church leader, then he could not be allowed to minister any more.

The bitterness between the main church and the Donatist church grew and rivalled that awful animosity between Protestant denominations (let alone against the Romans) in the 1800s. Anything the other church did was declared to be ungodly and lacked any value.

Any sacrament, whether baptism or Holy Communion from a tainted minister was deemed to be unacceptable. Therefore, anyone switching to the Donatist church had to be rebaptised, and any minister had to be re-ordained.

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The main church struggled with the problem of what to do if someone came from the Donatist church into membership in the main one. Is a sacrament valid when it is done in a break-away church?

And as they listened to the Donatists' concerns over immoral or sinful clergy, they had to ask "Does the worthiness of the minister affect the value of the sacrament?"

The debate raged for a while. Eventually it was agreed that as with the Novationists and baptism, so with the Donatists and unfaithful ministers, the worthiness of the minister does not affect the value of the sacrament. I.e. if you discovered that a minister was absolutely immoral, and he had been hiding that sin for years, his wickedness has no effect on the baptisms and communions he had led. For it is by faith that we receive them, not by the faith of the minister.

This is reflected in the 39 Articles of Faith. Number 26 affirms that the wickedness of the minister in no way minimises the effects of the sacraments, or of the hearing of the word. However, the minister should be called to task, and deposed if needed.

The recent history of the church has been dogged by disclosures of immoral clergy, debates on women clergy and debates on ordaining homosexuals. Some people claim the church is no longer valid and many have left, and there have been divisions even here in Australia.

Yet the questions remain how serious is the breach? What place is there for repentance? Is a bishop tainted forever if he ordains certain people? Where is the place for calling on someone to repent?

We need to learn more from the Novation and Donatist situations. The divisions came about due to strongly held positions, yet where was the place for forgiveness? What we need is the courage to debate the issues openly, privately, biblically and with grace.

Then not only will we have a church that holds and teaches the truth, but she will also love and forgive, like her God.