

A History of the Baptists

By John T. Christian

CHAPTER III THE STRUGGLE AGAINST CORRUPTION

AT first there was unity in fundamental doctrines and practices. Step by step some of the churches turned aside from the old paths and sought out many inventions. Discipline became lax and persons of influence were permitted to follow a course of life which would not have been tolerated under the old discipline. The times had changed and some of the churches changed with the times. There were those who had itching ears and they sought after novelties. The dogma of baptismal regeneration was early accepted by many, and men sought to have their sins washed away in water rather than in the blood of Christ. Ministers became ambitious for power and trampled upon the independence of the churches. The churches conformed to the customs of the world and the pleasures of society.

There were, however, churches which remained uncorrupted, and there were faithful men who raised their voices against the departure from apostolic practice. An account will be given of some of the early reformers who offered their protest and called the people back to the simplicity of the gospel.

Chevalier Christian Charles Bunsen, while Prussian ambassador to London, walking in the light and breathing in the atmosphere of a purer age, held holy communion with the early churches. He used these earnest words:

Take away ignorance, misunderstanding, and forgeries, and the naked truth remains; not a spectre, thank God, carefully to be veiled; but an Image of divine beauty radiant with eternal truth! Break down the barriers which separate us from the communion of the primitive church—I mean, free yourselves from the letter of the later formulas, canons, and conventional abstractions—and you move unshackled in the open ocean of faith; you hold fellowship with the spirits of the heroes of Christian antiquity; and you are able to trace the stream of unity as it rolls through eighteen centuries in spite of rocks and quicksands (Bunsen, Hippolytus,4).

The first protest in the way of separation from the growing corruptions of the times was the movement of the Montanist churches. This Montanus, the leader, was a Phrygian, who arose about the year A. D. 156. The most

distinguished advocate of Montanism was Tertullian who espoused and defended their views. They held that science and art, all worldly education or gay form of life, should be avoided, because such things belonged to paganism. The crown of life was martyrdom. Religious life they held to be austere. Against a mortal sin the church should defend itself by rightly excluding him who committed it, for the holiness of the church was simply the holiness of the members. With such principles they could not fail to come in conflict with the popular Christianity of the day. The substance of the contentions of these churches was for a life of the Spirit. It was not a new form of Christianity; it was a recovery of the old, the primitive church set over against the obvious corruptions of the current Christianity. The old church demanded purity; the new church had struck a bargain with the world, and had arranged itself comfortably with it, and they would, therefore, break with it (Moeller, Montanism in Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia, 111.1562).

Their contention was not so much one of doctrine as of discipline. They insisted that those who had "lapsed" from the true faith should be rebaptized, because they had denied Christ and ought to be baptized anew. On this account they were termed "Anabaptists," and some of their principles reappeared in Anabaptism (Schaff, History of the Christian Church, II. 427). Infant baptism was not yet a dogma, and we know that it was rejected by the Montanists. Tertullian thought only adults ought to be immersed. The Montanists were deeply rooted in the faith, and their opponents admitted that they received the entire Scriptures of the Old and the New Testaments, and they were sound in their views of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit (Epiphanius, Hoer, XLVJII. 1). They rejected episcopacy and the right of the bishop's claim to exercise the power of the keys.

The movement spread rapidly through Asia Minor and North Africa, and for a time in Rome itself. It appealed very powerfully to the sterner moralists, stricter disciplinarians, and more deeply pious minds among all Christians. Montanism had the advantage of claiming divine revelation for stricter principles. Montanism had made so much stir in Asia Minor, before the close of the second century, that several councils were called against it, and finally the whole movement was officially condemned. But Montanism continued for centuries, and finally became known under other names (Eusebius, The Church History, 229 note 1 by Dr. McGiffert). In Phrygia the Montanists came in contact with, and probably in actual communion with, the Paulicians. We know that they were still in existence in the year 722 (Theophanes, 617. Bond ed.).

The rise of the Novatian churches was another outcropping of the old strife between the lax and strict discipline. In the year 250 Novatian strenuously opposed the election of Cornelius as the pastor of the church in Rome. Novatian declared that he did not wish the office himself, but he pleaded for the purity of the church. The election of Cornelius prevailed, and Novatian carried many churches and ministers with him in his protest. The vast extent of the Novatian movement may be learned from the authors who wrote against him, and the several parts of the Roman empire where they flourished.

These churches continued to flourish in many parts of Christendom for six centuries (Walch, *Historic der Ketzereyen*, 11.220). Dr. Robinson traces a continuation of them up to the Reformation and the rise of the Anabaptist movement. "Great numbers followed his (Novatian's) example," says he, "and all over the Empire Puritan churches were constituted and flourished through two hundred succeeding years. Afterwards, when penal laws obliged them to lurk in corners, and worship God in private, they were distinguished by a variety of names, and a succession of them continued till the Reformation" (Robinson, *Ecclesiastical Researches*, 126. Cambridge, 1792).

On account of the purity of their lives they were called the Cathari, that is, the pure. "What is still more," says Mosheim, "they rebaptized such as came over to them from the Catholics" (Mosheim, *Institutes of Ecclesiastical History* 1.203. New York, 1871). Since they baptized those who came to them from other communions they were called Anabaptists. The fourth Lateran Council decreed that these rebaptizers should be punished by death. Accordingly, Albanus, a zealous minister, and others, were punished with death. They were, says Robinson, "trinitarian Baptists." They held to the independence of the churches; and recognized the equality of all pastors in respect to dignity and authority.

The Donatists arose in Numidia, in the year 311, and they soon extended over Africa. They taught that the church should be a holy body. Crespin, a French historian, says that they held the following views:

First, for purity of church members, by asserting that none ought to be admitted into the church but such as are visibly true believers and true saints. Secondly, for purity of church discipline. Thirdly, for the independency of each church. Fourthly, they baptized again those whose first baptism they had reason to doubt. They were consequently termed rebaptizers and Anabaptists.

In his early historical writings David Benedict, the Baptist historian, wrote with much caution of the denominational character of the Donatists. He followed closely the statements of other writers in his history; but in his last days he went into the original sources and produced a remarkable book called a "History of the Donatists" (Pawtucket, 1875). In that book he recedes from his noncommittal position and classes them as Baptists. He quite freely shows from Augustine and Optatus, who were contemporaries, that the Donatists rejected infant baptism and were congregational in their form of government.

Dr. Heman Lincoln dissented from some of the conclusions of Dr. Benedict and called them fanciful. But that they held some Baptist principles he did not doubt. He says:

It is evident that the Donatists held, at some period of their history, many of the principles which are regarded as axioms by modern Baptists. In their later history, after a stern discipline of persecution, they maintained, as cardinal truths, absolute freedom of conscience, the divorce of church and state, and a regenerate church membership. These principles, in whose defense they endured martyrdom coupled with their uniform practice of immersion, bring them into close affinity with Baptists (Lincoln, *The Donatists*. In *The Baptist Review*, 358, July, 1880).

This is the position of an extreme conservative. Perhaps Dr. Lincoln underestimated the coloring which the enemies of the Donatists gave to the controversy, and he certainly did not give due credit to what Augustine says on infant baptism in his opposition to them. It has been affirmed that some of the Donatists placed too much stress upon the efficiency of baptism and affirmed episcopacy. This however is a matter of controversy of no great interest, and does not here concern us.

Governor Henry D'Anvers truly remarks:

Augustine's third and fourth books against the Donatists demonstrated that they denied Infant baptism, wherein he maintained the argument for Infant baptism against them with great zeal, enforcing it with severe arguments (D'Anvers, *A Treatise on Baptism*. 223, London, 1674).

Augustine makes the Donatists Anabaptists (Migne, *Patrologis Lat.*, XLII.). The form of baptism, according to Optatus, was immersion. Lucas Osiander, Professor in and Chancellor of the University of Tubingen, wrote a book against the Anabaptists, in 1605, in which he says: "Our modern Anabaptists

are the same as the Donatists of old" (Osiander, Epist cent 16. p.175. Wittenberg, 1607). These rigid moralists, however, did not count themselves Anabaptists; for they thought that there was one Lord, one faith, one baptism and that their own (Albaspinae, Observat. In Optatus, i). They took no account of the baptism of others, and contended that they were wrongly called Anabaptists.

The Donatists stood for liberty of conscience, and they were opposed to the persecuting power of the State Church, They were, says Neander, "the most important and influential church division which we have to mention in this period" (Neander, General History of the Christian Religion and Church, III. 258). Neander continues:

That which distinguishes the present case is, the reaction, proceeding out of the essence of the Christian church, and called forth, in this instance, by a peculiar occasion, against the confounding of the ecclesiastical and political elements; on which occasion, for the first time, the ideas which Christianity, as opposed to the papal religion of the state, had first made men distinctly conscious of, became an object of contention within the Christian church itself,—the ideas concerning universal, inalienable human rights; concerning liberty of conscience; concerning the rights of free religious conviction.

Thus the Bishop Donatus, of Carthage, in 347, rejected the imperial commissioners, Paulus and Marcarius, with the acclamation: "Quid est imperatori cum ecclesia?" (Optatus, Milev., De Schismati Donat. 1. iii. c. 3). And truly indeed the emperor should not have had anything to do with the control of the church. The Donatist Bishop Petilian, in Africa, against whom Augustine wrote, appealed to Christ and the apostles who never persecuted. "Think you," says he, "to serve God by killing us with your hand? Ye err, if ye, poor mortals, think this; God has not hangmen for priests. Christ teaches us to bear wrong, not to revenge it," The Donatist bishop Gaudentius says: "God appointed prophets and fishermen, not princes and soldiers, to spread the faith."

The position of these Christians was not only a protest but an appeal. It was a protest against the growing corruptions and worldliness of those churches which had sadly departed from the faith in doctrine and discipline; it was an appeal, since they were fervently called back to purity of life and apostolic simplicity. All through the days of darkness their voice was not hushed, and there was not wanting a people to stand before God. Maligned, they suffered with patience; reviled, they reviled not; and the heritage of these people is liberty of conscience to a world. All hail, martyrs of God.

