

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10178-3 - Schism, Heresy and Religious Protest

Edited by Derek Baker

Excerpt

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HERESY AND SCHISM IN THE LATER ROMAN EMPIRE

by S. L. GREENSLADE

FEW Paris theologians like Beda's bitterness. How can you win if you drive those who disagree with Luther into his camp? Hatred like this made Arius a heresiarch, drove Tertullian out of the Church. This is the way to make heretics.¹ So Erasmus, and elsewhere he reflects how he exposed himself to the charge of heresy by trying to be just to heretics. He was kinder than Tertullian who had no mercy for them. Heresy is the devil's work, one of the manifold ways he attacks truth. It is evil, it is sin; it is worse than schism, it is blasphemy, a kind of adultery, close to idolatry. Heresy brings eternal death, while persecution at least gives birth to martyrs. Heretics are the ravening wolves who attack Christ's flock. Humanly considered, heresy is a sin of the flesh for, as an act of choice, it is self-assertion against God, and so the heretic is self-condemned. More properly it is demonic, the spiritual wickednesses from which it comes were sent by the devil.²

Not only the fiery Tertullian so speaks. To Irenaeus the peace-lover heretics are self-condemned since they oppose their own salvation, they are blasphemous, they are slippery snakes, they will go to eternal fire. Since they bring strange fire to the altar, they will be burned up by fire from heaven, like Nadab and Abihu. To Origen the truth-seeker they are traitors: all heretics, like Judas, call Jesus 'Rabbi' – and kiss him.³

Here is already an entrenched notion of heresy. How did it come about? This study will be more theological than sociological, for, although the Church lives in history and its members are exposed to all manner of social and cultural influences, it is still the Church, charged to be itself and to fulfil its mission.

The New Testament occasionally calls a group *haeresis* without pejorative implication. But when Paul blamed the Corinthians for their divisions (*schismata*), he continued with a fateful proof-text:

¹ Erasmus, *Opus Epistolarum*, ed P. S. Allen, vi: 1721, viii: 2136 (Oxford 1926, 1934).

² Tertullian, *Adversus Praxean* 1, *De Praescriptionibus* 1–6 and *passim*.

³ Irenaeus, [*Adversus Haereses*], ed W. W. Harvey (Cambridge 1857), I ix, II viii, IV xl. Origen, *Commentariorum Series*, 100.

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[More information](#)

S. L. GREENSLADE

There must be *haereseis* so that the *dokimoi*, the sound, among you may be manifest (1 Cor., 11:19). The blame is moral, for faction, and in the context the soundness is not explicitly doctrinal, though a comprehensive loyalty may be intended. In the *Pastorals*, which Irenaeus and the rest took to be Pauline, the concept is doctrinal. There is sound religious teaching and false, *heterodidaskalia*; the false teacher is ignorant and diseased. The heretic is obstinate, self-condemned, and if he will not respond to warnings twice given, he is to be shunned – more fateful proof-texts (1 Tim., 6:3–5; Titus, 3:10).

It sounds harsh: no sympathy with the genuinely puzzled, no concern for intellectual liberty. But it has point. As Israel was delivered from exile to be a holy, separate people, so Christians, delivered from the world, must be a holy people unto the Lord, his own possession, though with a mission to the world. To discharge that mission the Church must make clear to itself and others what it stands for in thought and action, must develop the institutions proper to its nature and mission, must be different from the world till it conquers the world. It must also be manifestly a single entity, one Church. In a pagan environment one proof-text, however balanced with others, will be, ‘Come ye out from among them, and be ye separate, and touch not the unclean thing’ (2 Cor., 6:17, citing Isa., 52:11). No moral compromise, no doctrinal syncretism. This was not sociological aspiration but theological demand. Brought into being by divine action first in Israel, finally in Christ, the Church was anchored in history to an event in Christ, mediated by a historical group of apostles and maintained by God through the Spirit of Christ active in historical processes. It was charged with a historical mission now seen as universal: ‘Go ye, and make disciples of all nations.’

On the one hand, then, the Church must look backwards to Christ, to the apostles, their teachings and institutions, thus preserving its God-given identity. On the other hand it must discover the fulness of its resources by responding in the course of its mission to the Spirit’s activity. Here it must look forwards, sensitive to changing needs of the world, intellectual and moral. Problems were inevitable, through ignorance, sin and circumstance: there must needs be choices, and some will be wrong. Tensions between – in modern terms – individual rights and the establishment will often be acute. Behind both heresy and schism lie basic questions: for the Church, Am I remaining my true self?; for the individual, On what terms can I join?, or, Do I really belong?. Historians ask why individuals were not at ease in

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[More information](#)*Heresy and schism in the later Roman empire*

Zion, why groups broke away, how they were treated, whether the Church chose the right means to keep its identity and unity, how it responded to suffering and to success and power. All this has its sociological side to which I try, if but briefly, to do justice. But the theological issues and criteria are paramount. How could the Church be loyal both to what was given in Christ in a few years of the first century and to the forward-leading Spirit, responding to the needs of mankind?

2

Return for a moment to Paul. He stood for Christ as Lord, as authority. He stood also for liberty against law, the freedom with which Christ set us free. You can extract a creed from Paul, who was passionately anxious that no one should preach another gospel, but he wants allegiance to this Lord to spring from *pistis*, personal commitment, and to bring life in Christ and thereby in the christian community, which is not an amorphous group of individuals but is delimited by some clear beliefs, like the Resurrection of Christ, and by some institutions, like baptism and eucharist, and by a real, if undefined, acceptance of an apostolic authority derived from Christ. Liberty cannot be unrestrained – we see this in his dealings with Corinth – yet Christ's gift of freedom must be cherished. The ideal is not, as the *Pastorals* almost suggest, a collection of children believing and doing what instructors of unquestionable authority tell them, but growth into the full stature of Christ through, and into, freedom. Hence another inescapable tension, between accepting the given and freely giving oneself. How did choices demonstrate the sound members?

The gnostic challenge, though crucial, need not be described in detail. In a sense Gnostics stood for freedom of thought and organisation, claiming both to be progressive Christians on some speculative or eclectic or syncretistic basis, and to be true to scripture properly understood or to tradition, perhaps their own secret traditions. Some teachers were attracted by this outlook, and they must have been difficult for early bishops to size up and handle, while most ordinary Christians probably sensed that something was wrong. So came a crisis of authority, resolved fairly quickly by standing upon the backward-looking note of apostolicity. Faced by faction at Corinth, Clement of Rome had stressed order, obedience and the rights of a ministry sent by God through Jesus and the apostles. Ignatius, fearing not only faction but evaporation of the historicity of Christ through

3

1-2

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

S. L. GREENSLADE

gnostic speculation, had found a simple solution in the maxim, Hold to your bishop, whatever he approves pleases God.¹ Before long the meaning of apostolicity as the hall-mark of authentic Christianity had been developed and formalised, especially by Irenaeus and Tertullian. Saving truth has been revealed in Christ and given by him to the apostles and by them to the Church. Trust them. Their teaching is known primarily in the apostolic scriptures, the Old Testament accepted by them and their own writings or those of close companions (the essentials of the New Testament canon were almost settled by Irenaeus's time) and it is by scripture that heresy should be refuted. The obvious problem of interpretation was eased as to fundamental beliefs by confidence in a rule of faith (*regula fidei* or *veritatis*) apostolic in origin, which sets bounds to liberty of exegesis. Then there was the tradition of important churches, also authoritative where trust in its continuity from the apostles seemed warranted by apostolic foundation and an unbroken succession of bishops with a duty to preserve the apostolic faith and institutions. When such churches plainly agreed, confidence reached its maximum. 'Is it likely that so many churches would have erred into one faith?' asked Tertullian. 'Where uniformity is found among many, it is not error but tradition.' Christianity is salvation, not philosophy, *divinum negotium*, something already done once for all and given to us by God. A time comes when you have to accept or reject it, you cannot endlessly seek without finding. Heresy is persistent contradiction of scripture as epitomised in the rule of faith agreed among apostolic churches.²

We see dangers in this backward-looking position. Is scripture clear and uniform, how is it related to tradition, did the apostles know and understand so much, cannot bishops or the bulk of the Church go astray, will not ecclesiastical authority eventually triumph over scripture? What room for liberty, for charity? Yet in principle Christians cannot evade the implications of their faith's givenness and particularity, while in practice the early Church could probably not have preserved its identity and saved itself from dissolution through syncretism without such confidence in apostolicity. Besides, the scope of heresy was at this time limited to 'things necessary to salvation', and though the notion of essential beliefs contains its own problems, it allows and even safeguards some freedom. It was the basis of Origen's exegesis. It allows

¹ I Clement 40–4; Ignatius, for example *Ephesians* 3–6, *Smyrnaeans* 8.

² Irenaeus, I *praefatio*, ii; iii i–iv; v xx. Tertullian, *De Praescriptionibus* 14, 28 and *passim*. See Origen, *De Principiis* I *praefatio*.

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Heresy and schism in the later Roman empire*

also for charity in that there can be differences of opinion within the unity of a comprehensive Church. What had happened so far was not that the whole content of orthodoxy had been investigated and formulated, but rather that its norms had been generally accepted. Discipline had not yet been codified. Room was left for response to the Spirit in the inner life of the Church and its mission. But the theology of authority had not been finally settled, and its exercise was already open to abuse by those who possessed or sought power.

The initial popularity of Montanism points to anxiety and discontent. It stood for, though it distorted, some things which had been prominent in primitive Christianity: confidence in immediate action of the Holy Spirit, prophecy as its normal medium, expectation of a speedy *Parousia*, stern preparation for it. Montanism did not precipitate a doctrinal crisis, since it did not deny the finality of scripture for the faith nor dissent from the rule of truth. The Paraclete would expound scripture, not contradict it, nor invent new saving doctrines. In morals and discipline, however, the Spirit would teach the Church how to live. Here, though it may not have been originally a reaction from institutionalism, Montanism threatened to disrupt the rather authoritarian pattern which was being designed to meet Gnosticism, and to replace it, not by freedom, but by a different authority. In Tertullian moral and disciplinary decisions, involving excommunication and so one's chance of salvation, belong to *spiritalis homines* in the Church which is *spiritus*, not *numerus episcoporum*.¹ This implies a different ecclesiology. Had Montanism prevailed, its emphasis upon prophets rather than episcopal guardians of apostolic tradition must, for all Tertullian's denials, have unwound the triple cord of apostolic scripture, rule and ministry. Perhaps the shake-up would have been salutary. The Church, however, set itself to strengthen precisely these defences: the Canon was not quite closed, but later candidates needed strong backing from apostolic churches, prophets were discounted, bishops seen as succeeding to apostolic authority and their control of discipline taken for granted. This apostolic Church was the mediator of salvation, the home of the saved, including sinners. Certainly it must keep the faith, but heresy was not the chief issue in the third century, since the central problems set by the Modalists and Origen and Paul of Samosata did not come to a head until the fourth. More concentrated attention was given to problems of discipline and, with them, of schism. So we come to Cyprian.

¹ Tertullian, *De Pudicitia* 21.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10178-3 - Schism, Heresy and Religious Protest

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

S. L. GREENSLADE

3

For him the Church is by nature one and cannot be divided. Its inner unity and uniqueness are supported and defined by its apostolic structure in which bishops are heirs to the apostles *vicaria ordinatione* – apostles, as Clarus put it concisely in 256, ‘quibus nos successimus eadem potestate ecclesiam Domini gubernantes’.¹ Locally and universally bishops are the glue of the Church, their responsibility to God carrying with it a right to obedience from the faithful. Succession is to one’s predecessor in a see, not one’s consecrator, though lawful choice and consecration are necessary. If a splinter-group pretends to appoint a bishop, he can only be *pseudepiscopus, nemini succedens*, however many bishops consecrated him. In Rome Novatian could find no empty *cathedra* to sit on. Any such group is non-church, has no ministry, no sacraments, no Holy Spirit. There is no salvation in it. Without the Spirit, it must soon wither away, a vulnerable spot in Cyprian’s doctrine. Right or wrong, it is a clear and coherent theory, binding Church, ministry and sacraments together. It has no hesitation about episcopal authority in doctrine and discipline. Only about their independence in relation to one another or to a council does Cyprian lack clarity.

This apostolic Church confidently declared itself alone the divinely guaranteed instrument of salvation, quite unconscious of the derogatory sense Harnack would one day attach to *Heilsanstalt*. No plurality of churches was acknowledged. Subsequent history brings out the threat of a conforming, mechanical Christianity lurking in this institutional confidence. Already, indeed, Clement and Origen were more interested in teachers than in bishops, in Christians of advanced spiritual understanding than in those who worked their passage obediently through the practical life to salvation – an attitude which might set ecclesiological problems. Others took up the ecclesiological issue directly. If the Church is by nature one, it is also by nature holy and can lose its *esse* through the unholiness of its members. The point was made in disputes between Callistus and Hippolytus and between Tertullian and Callistus or the bishop of Carthage over adultery, and in Cyprian’s anxieties over the discipline of Christians who compromised or lapsed into idolatry under persecution. Whatever personal factors –

¹ Cyprian, *Ep* 66: 4; *Sententiae* 79. For Cyprian’s ecclesiology see G. S. M. Walker, *The Churchmanship of St Cyprian* (London 1968) and my *Schism [in the Early Church]* (2nd ed London 1964).

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Heresy and schism in the later Roman empire*

and they were many – affected the lax Novatus and the rigorist Novatian, it was the resulting theology of the Church that mattered in the long run. Is it a society of saints kept exclusive by stern discipline or a school and home for forgiven sinners?

Groups which took the former line were not being liberal or uninstitutional. Novatianists, and Donatists after them, claimed to be exclusively the Church. And at this date grave problems could neither be resolved by a tolerant denominationalism within a wider catholicity nor ended by papal fiat, as is plain from the storm raised by Victor's action in the Quartodeciman controversy and by the joint resistance of Cyprian of Carthage and Firmilian of Caesarea to Stephen. Councils were emerging as organs of catholicity: they were used in the Easter debates, against Montanism and Novatianism, and later against Paul of Samosata. But the theory of councils was not yet developed, and their authority and power *vis-à-vis* such great sees as Alexandria, Antioch, Ephesus, Carthage, and above all Rome, was quite unclear.

Before Constantine, the Church was fighting for its life: not always for the mere right to exist, but for freedom to be itself and discharge a mission seen mainly as rescuing souls from paganism for eternity, though since good conduct was a means to that end, the hope of changing society dawned. Institutions proper to the mission had to be developed, and risks intrinsic to institutional life were taken: the danger of codification in thought and practice, of undue submission to authority, of complacency, of getting by on minimum standards for salvation. One can fairly ask how far devotion to the person Christ had been exchanged, before the third century ended, for devotion to a christian system, though we know too little about ordinary Christians of the time to answer the question. Even if the Church rejected élitism, the social consequences of professing Christianity and, at times, the selective process of actual persecution kept standards up. There is something grand in the sense of unity and catholicity which inspired the institution to offer all men new life within a visible fellowship of the Spirit. How would the Spirit fare against human frailty when the Church was offered a privileged status in the world?

4

Two movements cover most of the fourth century problems: the Donatist schism and the Arian heresy. Not that schism and heresy can always be distinguished. Asked what heresy Novatian introduced,

7

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

S. L. GREENSLADE

Cyprian replied that we should not be curious about what he taught since he taught outside. Elsewhere he argued that Novatianists do not observe the catholic *lex* and *symbolum* since, when they profess belief in holy Church, they lie, not possessing the Church. Thus they are both schismatics and heretics. When Cresconius denied that Donatists were heretics, Augustine answered that inveterate schism amounts to heresy.¹

Non-theological factors entered largely into Donatism: pique of a woman *pecuniosissima et factiosissima* reproved by an archdeacon, Numidian jealousy of Carthage, regional if not strictly national feeling against Rome, economic grievances of poor against rich, country against city – all probably played some part in the course of the long schism, and without them the theological debate might have proved less intractable. Full weight must be given to these elements, discussed in detail by Dr Frend and others, including some Marxists.² The theological issues, however, were real, important, and of lasting consequence – and more exciting than the dry words of Article 26, ‘Of the Unworthiness of the Ministers, which hinders not the effect of the Sacrament’.

The main ecclesiological tradition in Africa was Cyprian’s unique apostolic Church outside which are no ministry or sacraments. But rigorism was also powerful. One breach in Cyprian’s stronghold was made by pope Stephen who, though he fully shared Cyprian’s concept of apostolicity and held with him that there is no salvation outside the apostolic body, did allow a certain validity to baptism performed by heretics or schismatics. If the recipient came over to the true Church, the baptism need not be repeated; it began to work.³ This view had been widely accepted before Donatism began. Another breach was due to Cyprian himself when, perhaps illogically, he told some Spanish churches that a Godfearing *plebs* ought to separate itself from a sinful (read, lapsed) bishop, since it could not be immune from the contagion of his communion and would be contaminated by sharing in his sacrifices (read, eucharists) which God could not accept.⁴ Fateful generalisation from a single case! The second breach was fundamental to the Donatist position, the first to the catholic rejoinder.

In 304 the imprisoned confessors of Abitinae ventured to excommunicate *traditores* and their *consortes*, and, if we trust a second account, delivered this verdict: ‘Si quis traditoribus communicaverit, nobiscum

¹ Cyprian, *Ep* 55:24; Augustine, *Contra Cresconium* II 4.

² W. H. C. Frend, *The Donatist Church* (2nd ed Oxford 1971) with the bibliography and introductory note.

³ Cyprian, *Epp* 69–75, especially 75:8–15.

⁴ Cyprian, *Ep* 67.

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[More information](#)*Heresy and schism in the later Roman empire*

partem in regnis caelestibus non habebit.¹ This infection-principle was formalised in Donatist theology. They did not repudiate Cyprian's apostolic Church; they claimed to be that Church, since, by Cyprian's own statement, apostate bishops are *ipso facto* excommunicate before official deposition, and their sacramental acts – baptisms, eucharists, ordinations – are automatically null and void. In particular Caecilian had been consecrated by a *traditor*, that is, not consecrated, so that their man Majorinus duly succeeded to the vacant see of Carthage. To accept a traitor's sacraments, to adhere to Caecilian, must infect the Church. The Donatists, alone both holy and apostolic, were the catholic Church. And by another Cyprianic principle, only within that Church were baptisms valid. Therefore they rebaptized. So this schism had its own theology, even if not one formally heretical by contradicting the creeds verbatim.

Though Donatism owed much of its strength to other factors, this holiness theology, as later events have often shown, required an answer, which, when it came, was constructed from accepted principles but was potentially revolutionary. Take first the non-Donatists, to most eyes the catholic Church. Augustine accepted Cyprian's teaching on its apostolic structure and then, emphasising the action of Christ as minister of all sacraments, argued that where they are duly celebrated by a minister of the Church, his moral condition will not prevent Christ from fulfilling his promises. Baptism and ordination happen. On this argument Donatists were non-suited for lack of apostolic succession. They had left the Church.

But Augustine genuinely wanted to get them back, and was willing to investigate the bearings of his own argument upon their present status in schism; for they were not pagans nor credally heretics. So the old concession about baptism *extra ecclesiam* was extended to ordination and theologically deepened. In both Christ, as minister, confers a *consecratio*: the recipient is a baptized or ordained person. Though outside the catholic Church they are not effective to salvation, these actions need not be repeated if he enters it. Already valid, they become efficacious. On these terms men might more readily come in, and bishops could be received as bishops, *cum honoribus*, especially if accompanied by their flock. Augustine made other points: that Donatists in Africa, unrecognised abroad, lacked the catholicity inherent in God's promise to establish the Church in all nations, that their uncharitable temper proved their want of the Holy Spirit, the

¹ *Acta Saturnini*, PL 8 (1844) cols 690–703. See *Schism*, pp 117–20.

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[More information](#)

S. L. GREENSLADE

mark of the true Church. His ecclesiology created a new situation, though it was not at once accepted, by popes Innocent and Leo for example.¹

After some conciliatory overtures and much bitter conflict Donatism was defeated less by argument than by coercion. Comment on this must wait till something has been said of Arianism, since state intervention in church affairs is one story. Meanwhile, observe one theological consequence of Augustine's thinking. It can unsettle confidence in discerning the true Church by its structure. Men go on asking if they should not separate from a body which authoritatively rejects adequate discipline, or if charity is a safe test of the Spirit's indwelling. To find catholicity should we look first for apostolic structure or apostolic faith? Can they never clash, and if they seem to, what authority decides the case? Some answers to problems intensified by his ecclesiology are now freshening ecumenical dialogue, while others long ago convinced the Reformers that they had true churches by virtue of loyalty to the apostolic Gospel. Is it orthodoxy, then, that determines catholicity, and if so, what is heresy?

Despite high counts by hereseologues from Hippolytus on, it had no wide range of content in the ante-Nicene church. To be taken with the seriousness found in Irenaeus or Tertullian, it must usually concern the nature of God or the person of Christ. Paul of Samosata was banned because his teaching seemed utterly contrary to the christian faith. But, though some Modalists were condemned, modalist thinking continued as one tradition within the Church, as did some Logos-doctrine which was later denounced. Origen was attacked, but not excommunicated, Dionysius of Alexandria easily made his peace with Rome. For even within this narrow range implications were rarely worked out in detail, while many fundamental doctrines – atonement, eucharist, Holy Spirit – were left undefined. Orthodoxy meant broad acceptance of living tradition, not of a precise theological scheme. With Arianism every implication was wrung out, controversy was more public, far more participated in it, far more power-politics affected it.

Our concern is rather with methods of controversy than the doctrine itself. First, philosophy. Tertullian (in some moods) and Hippolytus

¹ I have tried to work out the implications of Donatism and Augustine's reply in *Schism*. On the subsequent history of reordination consult L. Saltet, *Les Réordinations* (Paris 1907) and H. E. J. Cowdrey, 'The Dissemination of St Augustine's Doctrine of Holy Orders during the later Patristic Age', *JTS*, new series, xx (1969) pp 448–81.