

What About Them Donatists?

The Donatist comparison has been repeated numerous times since the events of General Convention 2003—or, rather, misapplied. Since the move last week by the Common Cause Partners to form a new Anglican Province in North America—a move they made, I might add, in direct response to the request of the majority of Global South Primates at Kigali in 2006—the accusation is already being dragged out once again. The “breakaway” Anglicans are “Donatists.” They have broken fellowship with those they consider to be sinful. And the Church has repeatedly repudiated this position since the time of Augustine. Sinfulness does not invalidate the sacraments.

Who were the Donatists? The Donatists were a sect in Northern Africa that disagreed with the rest of Catholic Christendom, not primarily over doctrine, but over discipline. They claimed that the sacraments of sinful clergy were invalid. According to Augustine, the primary problem with Donatism was not their theological position so much as that they refused to listen to the rest of the Church. Internationally, they were a small sect within Catholic Christendom, confined to a corner of Northern Africa. However, within Northern Africa, they were the majority.

There is indeed a parallel with the current Anglican situation—but not as it is so often claimed. TEC (like the Donatists) is (within the Church Catholic) a small insignificant sect. Even within the Anglican Communion, they are small potatoes—with an ASA (average Sunday attendance) of something like 700,000. TEC, like the Donatists, has embraced its own peculiar theological position—a position rejected not only by the vast majority of Catholic Christendom, i.e., not only the Roman Catholics, the Orthodox, the vast majority of Reformation Churches, but, of course, the vast majority of churches in the Anglican Communion. (To the best of my knowledge, the only churches in the world that have decided to

bles same sex unions or ordain openly gay clergy are (besides TEC), the Unitarians, the United Church of Christ, and the Metropolitan Community Church—hardly a company known for its strident orthodoxy or catholicity!) [Update: The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has now been added to this list. A sad turn of events for a church that once committed itself to the authority of Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions found in the Book of Concord.]

Like the Donatists, TEC has also refused to listen to Catholic Christendom. When warned repeatedly by the Anglican Communion that the consecration of Gene Robinson would break the Communion, they proceeded anyway. After the consecration, TEC has ignored repeated requests to turn back. When given until GC 2006 to turn back, TEC responded ambiguously. When given until Sept 30, 2007 to clarify whether they intended to turn back, TEC offered further obfuscation.

Like Donatism, TEC's actions have had international ecclesial consequences. The vast majority of churches in the Anglican Communion are out of or in impaired Communion with TEC at this point. Pope Benedict XVI made it clear when meeting with Rowan Williams that the new situation was unacceptable. The Orthodox Churches have broken off ecumenical relations with TEC.

But there are other parallels between the Donatist situation and the current situation in TEC. While a majority worldwide, the orthodox Catholics in North Africa were a minority in Northern Africa. While a minority in North America, orthodox Anglicans are a majority worldwide. But there is an additional parallel. Although the Donatists were the largest body that was a physical descendant of Catholic Christendom in Northern Africa, Augustine argued that, by refusing to heed the voice of Catholic Christendom worldwide, the Donatists were no longer a Catholic body. Augustine did not argue that, regardless of the Donatist errors, he must stay within the Donatist Church because they were the historical descendants of the Catholics in Northern Africa, and the largest ecclesial

body that could claim Catholic descent. To the contrary, Augustine refused to share communion with them.

There were, accordingly, overlapping jurisdictions in Northern Africa. For every Donatist bishop, there was a Catholic bishop. When Catholic bishops outside Northern Africa recognized Augustine or visited him, they were guilty of "border crossing."

However, a far more relevant parallel is not between TEC and the Donatists, but between TEC and the Arians or Nestorians. TEC's new position on sexuality is every bit as much a departure from historic orthodoxy as were the theologies of Arius or Nestorius. I would argue, more so, because TEC's new theology is a rather clear repudiation of the authority of Scripture, and the adoption of an enthusiast ecclesiology. That the issue is not primarily about sexuality has been clear from the repeated statements of the Presiding Bishop and others that behind TEC's theology about sexuality is a pluralist soteriology that reduces Jesus Christ to one savior among many, and consequently has no definable soteriology or doctrine whatsoever, except for the doctrines of inclusiveness and diversity—which cannot be questioned. The Presiding Bishop's recent comments about the new Province are simply illustrative of the theology that she has voiced many times:

[Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori] emphasized that all Episcopalians were welcome "if they want to be part of a diverse church. . . . But the expectation has to be that we are not a single-issue church. We're not a church that says you have to believe this one thing in this one way and there is no room for difference of opinion."

There is no question in my mind what would have been the response of the two great bishops of Alexandria—Athanasius and Cyril—to a theology that said "you [do not] have to believe this one thing in this one way and there is [necessarily] room

for difference of opinion.” They broke communion with Arius and Nestorius over issues that some would regard as “differences of opinion.” Any attempt to disparage those who have left TEC for GAFCON is ignoring the central issue unless it is recognized up front that the disagreement is not about “differences of opinion,” but over what constitutes heresy. CCP (and the majority of the Anglican Communion) have not broken communion with TEC because Gene Robinson is a sinner. They have broken communion with TEC because TEC has embraced heresy—and, despite repeated opportunities, has refused to repent.

There is, of course, another parallel between the TEC/Anglican Communion situation and the heresies of Arius and Nestorius. Unlike the Donatist situation—where the Donatists were a small private sect repudiated by all Catholics outside Northern Africa—the Church at the time of Arius and Nestorius was divided. There were times when the emperor supported Arianism, and there were times when Athanasius went into exile. As bishop of Constantinople, Nestorius was, for the Eastern Church, something like the equivalent of the Archbishop of Canterbury. Cyril and the Council of Ephesus excommunicated him, and refused to have communion with the Antiochian Church (which supported Nestorius), until they embraced Catholic orthodoxy. The Nestorian controversy resulted in a permanent split in the church—with the Orthodox Church and the Assyrian Church out of communion to this day. Nonetheless, none at the time were willing to say: “This is just a matter of opinion, and you don’t have to believe one thing or another.”