

A QUEST FOR GRACE OVER INTEGRITY IN THE SCHISM OF NORTH AFRICAN CHURCH 400-500 AD: A LESSON FOR THE 21st CENTURY CHURCH

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Abstract

Grace and integrity played a great role in the controversy between the official church of North Africa and Donatism in the 4th and 5th centuries AD. Donatism which name emerged from one of its strong proponents Donatus, set the entire North Africa Church in convulsion in her quest for a pure and holy church rather than a mixed church under the grace of God. Its stern position over grace and integrity appears to be an ideological problem which the church was moved to contend with. This move led to a serious clash between the official church and the Donatists. In order to bring an end to the clash, it took the intervention of several Church Councils in collaboration with the Imperial Authority. In their pursuit for a holy church, the Donatists maintained that all lapsed believers during persecution that intend to return to the church should be treated as unbelievers before they should be admitted in the church. By this position, the lapsed must repent, confess, and be re-baptized as a necessary condition to be reinstated in the church. In addition, there was no room for any former lapsed Pastor/Bishop or believer to serve as Pastor/Bishop when restored to the fold. But the official church under the intellectual prowess of St. Augustine denounced this position and presented grace as the ultimate means to handle casualty of faith in their struggle to earn salvation and not integrity. However, as the Donatists were recalcitrant and pertinacious, the church in collaboration with the state used the power of sword to silence them. The situation led to a tragedy and subsequently a total collapse of the church in North Africa in the 13th and 14th centuries AD. This article employs historical and biblical methods to showcase the relevance of grace over integrity in handling casualty of faith in the quest for salvation in the 21st century.

Introduction

North Africa and Egypt hosted Christianity from the first century of Christian advance. Christianity grew and became a dominant force engaging all societal echelons: that is; the nobles, the aristocrats, the rich and the poor of the ancient Roman world of North Africa. The church survived the imperial

persecution and gradually won the larger populations of the people of North Africa in antiquity. But the Christian church which had grown and produced notable men in the annals of the history of the church did not survive till modern time due to some factors, one of which was schism. Schism is among the main factors that led to her collapse with the rise of Arab Nations in North Africa in the seventh and eighth centuries (*Oxford Dictionary of Christian Church* 415). A renowned scholar on schism, David B. Barrett posits that:

Ecclesiastical schisms were frequent during the first six centuries of Christianity in North Africa particularly in Egypt. By the fifth century, the churches were divided into Dyophysites, Monophysites, Arians and Nestorians, and by the year 500 AD several inner-monophysitic divisions had emerged. In AD 634 Muslim rulers conquered Egypt, and within a few centuries all traces of Christianity had disappeared from North Africa with the sole exception of the Coptic Orthodox church along the Nile valley (Barrett 21).

By 1317 AD the Dongola church in Nubia part of present Sudan was converted to a Mosque. Between 13th and 19th centuries there was hardly any trace of Christianity in the North Africa within the area of Maghreb, except the Coptic Church in Egypt (Isichei 45). This tragedy which befell the church in the Mediterranean Basin of North Africa was attributed to some number of factors emerging from internal and external struggles. The article seeks to approach this topic from analytical perspective of history and biblical injunctions, deducing from the birth of the church to the time she was engulfed in the crises that gave birth to the clash between grace and integrity and the lesson the contemporary church may learn from it. It begins with the birth of the church in North Africa, the world and people of North Africa in antiquity and their Socio-political set up, the persecution in North Africa, the nitty-gritty of the problem between Donatists and the official church, factors that caused the schism of the church which gradually led to its fall, and whether grace should prevail over integrity in the management of casualty of faith in the quest to earn salvation.

Christianity and the World of North Africa during the Roman Time AD 100-500

Most scholars assert that, there is no clear date on how Christianity began in the ancient North Africa particularly the Maghreb, part of the areas which is

known today as Mauritania, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, and Libya. History however appears to indicate that Christianity was in the Roman part of North Africa from the apostolic era. Scholars who subscribe to this view argue that among those who received the Holy Spirit in the book of Acts Chapter two, the people of Cyrene were mentioned. Cyrene was part of Libya in the ancient world. In addition, history seems to show that Christianity spread rapidly and was accepted by an overwhelming majority of the population of this part of ancient Africa who contributed most significantly to the ministry of the Christian church during the early centuries of the church. Of course, the area witnessed the Roman civilization through the building of roads and symbols of Roman authority in the major cities like Carthage, Hippo, Thagaste, among others. Carthage then was the second largest city to Rome in the western part of the Roman Empire (Falk 23).

The ancient world of North Africa under Roman Empire was peopled with the Berber tribe, the Phoenicians who migrated to North Africa around 200 BC, the Libyans, Punic and some wandering or nomadic tribes in the interior parts of the land. Except the Phoenicians who settled in some strategic places around Carthage, all other tribes were aboriginal of Africa. Before the introduction of Christianity the Berber tribes were worshippers of African Primal Religion which venerates the spirit of natural objects. This in turn was reinforced by the Phoenician deities. Since Roman Authorities espoused these deities, they introduced the gods of Roman pantheon (27). But with the arrival of Christianity there was a diminishing influence of African Traditional Religion in this part of Romanized Africa.

The Persecution of the Church

The arrival of Christianity caused some Berber population and the Romanized tribes in North Africa to throw off the yoke of the Primal Religion and embrace Christianity. With passage of time around 250-400 AD, Christianity became a strong force to be reckoned with. Suddenly, persecution broke out and many Christians were forced to relocate to some hidden places like mountains, islands, forests and even deserts to maintain their relationship with Christ, the Lord. One prominent and respected leader of the church in North Africa, Cyprian one time Bishop of Carthage, was martyred in September, 258 AD. This persecution was an Empire wide persecution during the reign of Emperor Valerian (Knowles and Penkett 10). In spite of the persecution initiated by the imperial authorities to suppress or halt the growth of Christianity, the church continued to

grow and reached its golden age in the 4th century. With the declaration by Constantine the Great, the first Pro-Christian Emperor, making Christianity a legal religion of the empire, *religiollicita*; set a stage for Christianity to become a state religion. Knowles and Penkett assert that by AD 336 the number of Bishops in North Africa alone who met for a conference in Carthage, the Capital of the Roman province of North Africa rose to 270 (107). And by AD 411, no less than 286 Catholic bishops and 284 Donatists bishops gathered for a debate (Isichei 42). Certainly, this would have been a great opportunity for the church in North Africa to engage in propagating her faith to the Sub-Sahara Africa and beyond as the church of the apostles did in the land of Palestine at the beginning of Christian era. Sadly enough, the church under the protection of state, became wealthy and power drunk which opened doors for internal crises that degenerated into self-assertion and persecution of her members. This unfortunate development led to crises scenario between grace and integrity that gave birth to a chasm which resulted in the Donatists' schism in North Africa. Donatists' schism ignited by some factors set a pace for the gradual moribund of the church in the Maghreb around 7th and 8th centuries; and by 13th century, Christianity collapsed in North Africa. Till modern time it remains a minority and a persecuted church. All effort to resuscitate Christianity in this area from the time of Crusade to the era of modern mission was like plowing on the rock. Of course, Raymond Lull was one of the prominent figures in the outreach to North Africa during the era of crusade which did not yield fruit (Fuller 57). Recent development in the early 21st century seemed to show that Christianity is only found among the few western foreigners who were there for colonial mission and charity works under strict restriction because of terrorist activities (Gaiya 26).

The Problem between Donatists and the Official Church

The altercations between the Catholic Church of North Africa and the Donatists which gradually degenerated to schism began shortly after the edict of Milan AD 313 (Jowitt 51). This edict proclaimed the liberty of Christianity, making it a legal religion *religio licita*. Infact, it later became the state religion through Emperor Theodosius. Constantine did that to appease the God of Christianity whom he claimed helped him to defeat his opponent Maxentius in a war at Milvian Bridge in Rome (Boer 105). At this time in North Africa the edict would have aided the church to probably spread beyond the Sub-Sahara Africa through evangelism. This was sadly turned into quarrels and struggle within the

church. Funds, resources, and energy were wasted and gradually the church dwindled and collapsed with the advent of Arab nations in North Africa as earlier noted above.

But the bone of contention centres on errant brothers during the persecution of the church: How can one who denied Christ (especially a Pastor or Bishop) at the face of persecution be admitted in the church and even perform his function as Pastor? Should grace provide the basis or the integrity of the person? This posed a serious challenge to the church because during this time, Christianity respected the martyrs. According to the Donatists, escaping from martyrdom is a sign of apostasy and a disgrace to the body of Christ. It is like a Christian confessing he is a Muslim in Kano to save his life. They regarded those who escaped from persecution as the lapsed believers or believers without moral integrity. On the other hand, they called those who did not deny Christ throughout the persecution the confessors. Therefore, we come to have the church of the lapsed and that of the confessors (the church of the martyrs). The lapsed in the faith during persecution were sometimes treated as unbelievers or renegade in faith by the Donatists.

This raised a fundamental thesis for the contemporary church on how to handle similar cases of deviation without undermining the grace or the integrity of the church. For instance what right punishment or discipline should be prescribed by the church to a minister who impregnates a girl in his parish? What about a minister who is found to be a lesbian, homosexual, or one who indulges in incest, bestiality and other lethal sins which the Bible abhors or detests? Are these offences not tantamount to or worse than the ones committed by those who lapsed in the faith in the North Africa Church during persecution? Bear in mind that the former acted under duress and the threat of death, while the latter may act under the pleasures of this world. What about a pastor, leader, elder or any prominent member who takes or encourages some members to consult sorcerers? These and similar issues will be discussed under 'should grace prevail over integrity' as a lesson for the contemporary church.

In the case of North African Catholic Church the lapsed were accepted into the church without any prescribed condition when the persecution waned up. In line with this view Pastors, Bishops and members who lapsed during the imperial persecution were welcome freely to the church by laying of hands. But the Donatists protested vehemently against this position of the church in North Africa asserting that it was an abuse of holiness and purity in the church. This was

the bone of contention between the North African Catholic Church and the Donatists. Here are the views of each group.

The Position of the Donatists

The Donatists branch of the church in North Africa maintained that, the integrity of the church must not be compromised at the expense of the lapsed believers who were regarded as renegades and unbelievers hence apostates. This view as ascertained by some scholars was purely ideological. To them, all lapsed believers during persecution and the Pastors (Ministers) could only be readmitted to the church on the condition of sincere repentance, confession and rebaptism. This view is similar to that of extreme Anabaptist in the 16th century reformation in Europe who maintained that all believers that seceded from Catholic must be re-baptized (Shelley 247). In addition to this view, all Donatists hold the view that all sacraments performed by a former lapsed Minister/Bishop, stands dissolved hence invalid, null and void. On this ground a former lapsed believer was not qualified or fit to be a Minister in the church.

This brought about the rejection of ordination of Caecilian by Philip of Aptunga. Philip of Aptunga was a *traditore* or a traitor, who was a lapsed Pastor/Bishop who took part in the ordination of Caecilian. The English word 'traitor' originated from the Latin word *traditore* which means "one who hands over the scriptures to be burned," and later it took the meaning of betrayer. The Donatists protested vehemently against this consecration in Carthage declaring the ordination of Caecilian invalid, null and void and disdained their loyalty to him. In the place of Caecilian, Majorinus was consecrated by the radical Donatists' group, but was later found to be a traditor himself. Majorinus was later succeeded by Donatus in the same year because he passed on immediately (Falk 44). Donatus whose name 'Donatism' emerged led this schismatic group for many years in opposition to the official church. He was regarded as a *Mahdi*, a religious reformer who championed the course of this group to maintain holiness and purity as a mark of a true church (Helleman and Gaiya 155). This position was maintained by the Donatists in several councils organized by the state and the church to quash the matter or resolve the conflict. But the Donatists were implacable and adamant.

The Position of the Official Church

The entire Roman Catholic Church in the 4th and 5th centuries was restive in North Africa over the left-wing sect called Donatism. In several Church Councils, from Carthage to Arles, the Donatists were routed. The intricacies of the conflicts became worse when Caecilian was ordained (consecrated) as Bishop of Carthage in 311 by Philip of Aptunga. But all the Councils held declared the ordination of Caecilian valid and the lapsed believers accepted in the Church without any condition. By this decision the Councils acted under the grace of God. The Donatists viewed this as espousing the dubious and erring ministers in the church. They were belligerent about this position asserting that the church did not meet up with her integrity as holy community hence secession set in.

Augustine one of the notable fathers of the early church in North Africa in the quest to ensure the unity of the church stepped into the matter. He expounded the position of the official church theologically. Falk says *he perceived the element of the works of righteousness in the Donatists emphasis on pure life and pure church* (47). He forcefully presented the grace of God in place of the integrity of the church.

In his support to the Catholic Church, Augustine argued that there is only one church which is the Catholic Church (universal church); seceding from it is tantamount to denying salvation. He adduces that there is no pure church or Minister as claimed by Donatists. He says a Minister is only ministering under the grace of God and not on the ground of purity and integrity (Andrew and Penkett 115). He avows that the validity of a sacrament does not depend on the purity of a Minister but the Holy Spirit. *Traditores* can be accepted into the church under the grace of God. *Without the grace of God it is impossible to resist the concupiscence*, says Augustine (Freund 673). He cited the Parable of the Tares and Wheat in (Matt 13:24-30), and also the parable of the net, (Matt 13:47-52), to illustrate that the militant church is a mixed multitude; pure and impure worshipping God together, till the end of ages they will be set apart. That is, at the *eschaton*, the Tares and the Wheat, the good and bad fish will be separated for eternal reward (Green 267).

On these solid and cogent arguments presented by Augustine, that ancient philosopher, rhetoric and systematician; the Donatist Emeritus of Caesarean replied with bombardment of scriptures saying; *an evil world was in rebellion against a holy God*. Augustine was well loaded with plenty ammunition on God's love to silence him. He says, *if you accuse, accuse from love, if you correct, correct from love, if you spare, spare from love, let love be rooted deep in you, and only good can grow from it*

(Andrew and Penkett 117). But was Augustine able to keep his word? Certainly, even Augustine at the end could not treat Donatists with love when the Donatists remained rebellious. The arguments advanced against Donatists were so strong that the church denounced them as heretics and hence outlaw. Augustine, I guess ran out of patience and forgot the love he preached in the interest of the unity of the church when he endorsed the state to persecute the seceded church, the Donatists. No wonder Frend addresses him as *a harsh victor* (672). In line with that, Gaiya too portrays his theology against the Donatists as a dangerous one (14).

But in another sense, were Donatists truly heretics or mere advocates of purity and integrity of the church? Was their teaching not rooted in scripture itself? Why were they branded as heretics as if heresy is equal to apostasy? Helleman and Gaiya assert that *both Catholic and Donatists were orthodox in their teaching. Donatists' stern position on purity of the church is what caused them to be at logger head with the Catholic Church* (152). If that is the reason then, one may think that, Donatists would have been given opportunity to worship in their own way as part of the universal church as in the case of Monophysite sect in Egypt and should not be branded as heretics or those who committed apostasy. The murky atmosphere surrounding the matters made both of them to be impatient. Therefore, some factors crept in. These factors probably caused them to persecute each other leading to a permanent chasm and subsequent schism in the church; a schism that weakened the church in North Africa and Egypt.

Factors that caused Split in the North African Church

Many scholars attempt to identify some factors that caused schism in the North African Church. These factors have direct or indirect link with the ideological perception of the Donatists' view of the church. The author outlines these factors based on logical deduction from the analyses of the controversy between the official church of North Africa and the Donatists. The factors include the following:

Lack of Doctrinal Base

In a close examination of the history of the early church one may deduce that the absence of cogent doctrinal standard to guide the church as she struggled over some hurdles was an issue. If at all, there were available doctrines at this period they were still at the infant stage. It was based on this fact that

Freund observes that, *issues concerning fundamentals of discipline and doctrine, that had been dormant for a half century forced their way to surface* (489). This posed great challenge to the early church particularly in North Africa. The Apostolic fathers faced with this challenge were compelled immediately to develop some doctrines to help combat heresies and apostasy in the early church. The move led to the construction of Nicene Creed in AD 325. This was followed by the canon of the New Testament which was completed towards the end of 4th century (Preus 31). Within this period, church organization began to take shape ecclesiastically (Kuiper 53-54).

However, in some quarters these doctrines as construed were apathetic and thereby rejected by some sections of the church. An event which led to the banishment of some church fathers like Arius and other schismatic groups like Dyophysites, Monophysites and Nestorians (Barrett 22). While in some areas, the resolution of the councils of the church which was expected to guide the church appeared to be ephemeral or fugacious as they failed to satisfy the zealot group especially in the North African Church. It is quite explicit that the inability of the church to formulate a standard doctrine from the beginning may be associated with incessant or intermittent persecutions of the church from the first century of Christian era to the time of Constantine the Great in the early 4th century. But sometimes a doctrine can only be formulated to address a problem or need that crops up in the system. For instance, when persecution ended in the early church, there was a serious problem of how to address the believers, particularly the clergy who lapsed during the imperial persecution in the North African church. What was the position of the church on those ministers (pastors) and members who compromised their faith by making sacrifice and venerating the Roman gods? Should they be freely accepted back to the church without any condition? Should they serve a period of discipline before they are re-admitted in the church? Should they repent again and be re-baptized as insisted by the Donatists, the puritans of the early North African Church? Should ministers who lapsed (compromised their faith and returned) be allowed to serve in their offices? The intricacy of this matter as raised in the above questions was worsened by the absence of standard doctrine to help the church take a firm position. As a result of this vacuum, a fire brigade

approach was adapted through several councils³ which yielded no positive result. Since the zealot group (the Donatists) were not satisfied, secession set in.

The Murky Socio-political Atmosphere of North Africa in the 4th century

No matter how one feels satisfied and complacent about this life spiritually and physically, the socio-economic and political life of such person must be taken into consideration. There is no doubt that one of the factors that propelled the rise of Donatism was the socio-economic and political imbalance of North Africa during this period in history. Records indicate that, by this time North Africa was colonized by the Romans. The law and social order were influenced by the Romans. The political leadership and even that of the church was mostly in the hands of highly placed aristocrats who were immigrants from the Western Europe. The Berber and the Punic tribes who were the original settlers of this part of Africa were mostly rural dwellers around the major cities of North Africa like Carthage.

When persecution ended, the Punic and Berber Christians were suspicious of these immigrants who colonized virtually every sphere of North Africa. The aboriginals (Punic and Berber) of North Africa at this era perceived injustices in the social order. It is in regard to this that Frend refers to the emergence of Donatism as a Berber patriotism (655). Isichei espouses this view when she says, *Frend Interpreted Donatism as a vehicle for Berber patriotism and for socio-economic protest, the protest of the urban poor and the rural peasants against a church increasingly closely identified with the land owning classes and imperial authority* (37). Helleman and Gaiya attest to this view when they note the extreme wing of Donatists (the *Circumcellions*) and describe the movement as *apeasant revolt, motivated by economic grievance to take up arms against the Imperial force* (152). The peasant Christians who were ready for Martyrdom viewed the rich immigrants as betrayers of Christian faith who were not ready to commit Martyrdom. No doubt Tertullian who lived in the 2nd and early 3rd century comments that, *I fear the neck, beset with pearl and emerald nooses, will give no room to the broadsword* (Isichei 36). This complex situation paved way for the emergence of *Circumcellions* at the countryside of North Africa. Gaiya says the movement emerged in 340 AD to terrorize the rich colonizers of North Africa which made life hard for them (13). *Circumcellion*

³ May be the Church Councils did not think deeply on the issue at hand, though all church theologies were decided by councils.

emanates from two Latin words, *circum* and *celliones*, meaning *those who crawl around homes*. The *Circumcellions* were violent, superstitious and even debauched, but they saw themselves as warriors of Christ, intent on conflict, and welcoming Martyrdom. The Donatists which they aligned with them to carry out their nefarious activities were disappointed with their wrong attitude. In 343 AD they were far out of control and Donatists Bishops requested military intervention to suppress them (Knowles and Penkett 111). Certainly, zeal with limited knowledge or without knowledge by followers of religion could amount to disaster⁴ as even in the case of suicide bombings we see in modern terrorism.

Limited Understanding on the Concept of the Church

The arguments presented by both the official Catholic Church and the Donatists in regard to the right and true church; contain some elements of ignorance about the Catholicism of the church. The idea of the church universal or Catholicism of the church *toto obi diffusa* as expressed in the debate seems to be vague and ambiguous, that is why each side sought to impose her view on the other.

As contained in the Nicenecreed which was on the process of gaining ground in the church in the 4th century, the church is one, holy catholic and apostolic; being a universal body of Christ. But a close cross-examination on the two views seems to present a paradoxical idea of the church. The church is one though fragmented visibly by denomination, yet the elect is united by one Lord, one faith and one Baptism known in the invisible realm to God (*Reformation Study Bible* 2094). Of course, in the argument put forward by Augustine, the idea of Catholicism appears to be visible. He says that the church must be diffused throughout the world, *toto obi diffusa*, as against the Donatists view of a church which referred to themselves as 'only the assembly of holy ones' found only in Africa, *conventicular Justorum* (Frend 674). But one may be tempted to ask, if Augustine truly understood the universality of the church, why did he persuade Honorius Government to proclaim unity by force and outlaw Donatists in 405 AD? (Frend 673). It is explicit that even if Augustine understood his position of *toto obi diffusa*, his support of government using sword against Donatists shows that he has a parochial understanding of the Catholicism of the church. It is because of this parochial view of the church that Augustine himself who is addressed as the

⁴ Proverbs 19:2; Romans 10:2.

Doctor of grace acted out of grace. Based on this perception, Gaiya asserts that Augustine developed a dangerous theology which led to the suppression of the Donatists (14).

First, he regarded those who seceded from the official church on the ground of purity (Donatists) as heretics and sinners who must be coerced into the church or banished from it. Of course Augustine tried to distinguish heresy from schism, but maintained that persistent schism leads to heresy (Knowles and Penkett 110). This of course may justify his position in supporting the imperial authority to persecute the Donatists. Frend says *Augustine identified the Donatists as heretics (not merely schismatic) who could be subjected to imperial legislation in exactly the same way as other criminals and Misbelievers, including poisoners and pagans* (671). By this statement it seems he has gone ultra. The concept of the unity of the church in diversity as seen in the idea of Catholicism of the church at this stage was nuance and likely ambivalent. Instead of justifying state persecution as contained in his letters between AD 399 and 412 which aggravated the sour relationship between the Catholic Church in North Africa and the Donatists, Augustine should have advised the church to allow the Donatists to be on their own as Monophysite sects in Egypt.

Perhaps, one may consider this action of the church and Augustine as the mistake of their time depicting the pressures mounted on them. But from all indication, it seems grace has been watered down because of ignorance. Frend seems to observe this when he says *these adversaries, unlike the Manichees, Augustine never understood* (692). Augustine was once a member of heretical movement known as Manicheism but did not understand Donatism as a branch of the church which deserved to be given freedom of worship.

In the related manner the Donatists whom Helleman and Gaiya describe in their book as 'puritans' in the North African Church were ignorant about the concept of a Catholic Church (152-156). Their view on *conventicular Justorum, the only holy church* found only in Africa is a myopic expression of what a church is. The idea of these puritans found expression in the theology of Cyprians as expounded by Helleman and Gaiya (154). In view of this, Frend opines that *Donatists' schism was the expression of the continued loyalty of North Africa Church regional grievances* (492). The concept of the church as a small unit of the chosen distinguishes her from the main Catholic Church (Isichei 38); hence a mere expression of ignorance of a true universal church which cuts across sectarian borders. Little wonder, Augustine refers to this myopic view of Donatists

succinctly as *frogs in the pond who thought they were the universal church...* “securus ad indicator bisterraru” (Isichei 38). Therefore, ignorance about the Catholicism of the church played a great role in influencing the North African Schism.

Ignorance about the Worldview of African Christianity

The worldview of the people is the beliefs and perceptions of the people on what they experienced about the world around them. How people react or respond to certain phenomenon greatly depends on the world view of the people. Understanding how a particular people view things will help in dealing with their religious beliefs and practices. Generally most African people hold undiluted beliefs on the purity and sanctity of gods in their religious beliefs and practices. They also hold an unwavering belief about deities in the Primal Religion (ATR). The unwavering belief of purity in religion seems to find expression in the new faith (Christianity), which was misunderstood by the official church.

When Donatists embraced Christianity, mostly from the peasant groups of Punic and Berbers tribes of Numidia Countryside, they expected a pure religious practice of the apostolic time, which appealed to their senses as in African Primal Religion in terms of purity. They also expected authentic Christianity that welcome Martyrdom during persecution. Isichei attests to this fact when she opines that, many Donatists were converts from Paganism (ATR). For this reason a bizarre response to Christian faith during persecution by highly placed citizens of Roman extraction and Phoenicians was a disappointment to the less privileged Christians who were mostly Africans. These highly placed citizens of Aristocratic class mostly evaded persecution and surrendered the scriptures to be burnt by the imperial authority and often goof off Martyrdom. The notorious African poor believers regarded these noble believers as betrayers and traitors hence unfit for the kingdom of Christ. Their notorious beliefs in purity of faith made them dissociated themselves from the official church.

No doubt, Peter Falk says *Augustine who championed the argument in favour of the Roman church did not seem to consider that the Donatists' branch of the church was an adaptation of Christianity to African thought*. He further adduces that it is *a national church of North Africa* (47). In support of this view Knowles and Penkett opine that, *at root, the Donatists were expressing an African tradition of thought and spirituality* (108). If allowed to linger on, she would have probably become the first independent church in Africa (Gaiya 13). Therefore, ignorance about their African idea of

fairness led to their persecution and subsequently the secession of North African Church.

Fusion of Church and the State

What has the Emperor to do with the church? This is one of the questions asked by a leader of Donatists, Donatus in reaction to the Emperor's attempts to put them to silence in collaboration with the official church (Wright 69). The fusion of church and the state in the time of Constantine opened doors for bizarre events in the early church. Although Ambrose of Milan holds the view that the church and state are different spheres. This explains why he resisted the concept of Pontifex Maximus or Caesaropapism.⁵ In his reaction to Emperor Auventius, he says *the emperor is in the church, and not above her. A good emperor seeks to help the church, not to fight her* (Rahner 68).

Therefore Ambrose's position was that of separation of state and the church. No wonder he categorically states that *the church belongs to God and the Emperor has no right over God's house* (68). However, in the early North African Church there was a partial fusion of church and state over certain ecclesiastical matters. This began with Constantine's victory over his rival Maxentius at Milvian Bridge in Rome around 312 AD. His promulgation of the edict of Milan in 313 AD granting freedom of worship to Christians set the pace for the fusion of the state affairs and the church. This arose because Constantine sought the unity of the church no matter the cost. Without the unity of the church, he thought his power may be doomed to collapse (foster 83). In North Africa, with the cessation of persecution, a problem arose on how to accommodate those Pastors (Ministers) and other lay believers who lapsed from the faith. Should the lapsed be accepted into the church without any discipline or prescribed condition since they appeared to be hypocrites? The Donatists considered such believers as sinners referring to them as *traditores* and can be readmitted into the church under the condition of repentance and rebaptism. On this situation the official church prescribed no condition for the lapsed believers, for this reason the Donatists considered the Catholic Church as impure which generated wrangles that attracted the state to step into the matter.

⁵Pontifex Maximus or Caesaropapism means, the Emperor was the lord (Pope?) of the church as well as the lord of the secular world of the entire Roman Empire. The idea developed with Constantine the first Pro-Christian Emperor

The Emperor who was addressed as Pontifex Maximus of the Empire, by implication the lord of both the state and the church began to adjudicate the disputes between the Donatists and the official church as the Donatist sect resisted every persuasion theologically and diplomatically. The state was left with the option to use sword to silence the Donatists by the directive of the church. The idea of state using sword (force) only made things worse because the church can only be ruled by the Word of God and not by the sword. It appeared when the idea of ruling the church by the Word of God was mangled and twisted in favour of sword, it generated the state of chaos and anarchy and subsequently the schism which weakened the church in North Africa. The anarchy and chaos were championed by the combat ready *circumcellions* schismatic group of Donatists who embarked on terrorism and Martyrdoms. They chanted a war cry *Deo laudes* (Praise the Lord) as they terrorized people making journey difficult for the people at the countryside (Isichei 38). The imperial authority in the quest to suppress them burnt down their churches, while some were confiscated by the state officials. It is glaring to note under this scenario, that one of the dangers of fusion of state and church lies in the fact; that the state can easily be manipulated to the use of coercive power to infringe on the freedom of religion and conscience.

In analyzing the bone of contention under this context, one wonders why Donatists should be persecuted by the church for advocating for the purity of the church that portrays the integrity of the church. In another sense, one also wonders why the Donatists should close the church for the casualty of faith after persecution. Certainly two wrongs cannot make a right. But what can the contemporary church learn from grace and integrity in handling similar issues in the church?

Should Grace Prevail over Integrity on Errant Believers?

Most churches today prescribe various forms of discipline or punishment for erring believers depending on their understanding of the scriptures. Some use the lenses of grace while others still uphold integrity as the basis for their discipline. This condition continues to perpetuate schism in the universal church probably because of divergent views and limited understanding of scriptures associated with diverse culture of the people. The clash or collision between the grace and the integrity in the North African church is thought provoking for the contemporary church in Africa. Many Churches break away today for almost similar reasons as in ancient North Africa. Many see grace as too lenient and

seem to allow room for believers to indulge in sin and life of hypocrisy. On the other hand, integrity which points to purity and high morality sometime seems to be harsh and also provides room for dictatorship, witch-hunting, and terrorism for the casualty of faith in the church. In the case of Catholic Church in ancient North Africa we saw Augustine presenting grace as the only option to restore the erring believers. For Donatists, integrity was the only way to a pure and genuine church, therefore genuine repentance and rebaptism was the only means to restore casualty of faith. In this clash, which should prevail, Grace or Integrity?

Grace and Integrity

Grace is the unmerited favour of God through which mankind who believes in Christ will be saved. It is demonstrated in the person and work of Jesus Christ (Ryrie 44). Integrity is the fruit of grace which preserves the moral standard of the church. The scripture says, *it is by grace you have been saved through faith in Jesus Christ*, Ephesians 2:8 (Complete Christian Dictionary for Homes and Schools 285). It is not by purity or integrity as claimed by Donatists. Integrity and purity are works of righteousness which cannot provide salvation. These are marks of a true church. Purity or righteousness of all human beings is like a filthy rag before God (Is64:6). Our integrity is in Christ without which our righteousness is invalid. 1 Corinthians 1:30 says.... *Christ is our righteousness, holiness and redemption* (NIV). Therefore, we have no reason to boast of self-righteousness (1 Cor. 1:31). The purity and integrity claimed by the Donatists are products of Grace. It is grace that first appears and shows us the path of righteousness, purity and integrity as claimed by the Donatists. Grace helps believers not to assume the position of God. It is grace that helps us to correct erring believers in love. Grace is not leniency or weakness, but an expression of God's love to help and save the weak believers.

But purity and integrity sometime tempt us to be judges in place of God. They make believers boast of self-righteousness like Donatists who claimed to be the only holy church found only in Africa. They open doors for witch-hunting of weak believers. They make the church to terrorize the casualty of faith and sometime encourage the spirit of dictatorship and schism or division in the body of Christ. Therefore, this paper is of the opinion that **grace should prevail over integrity in dealing with the casualty of faith in the church**. Even in the secular world, when duty clashes with sanitation, duty always prevails (Boer 13). Grace is an act and duty of God and must prevail over integrity. Grace provides the

ultimate equity of God for mankind which must prevail over integrity. Integrity is a duty of man emanating from the grace. King James in England used this principle in law when he made recommendation that whenever there was a clash between equity and common law, equity should prevail (Unyimadu and Obodo 6). But how will the church handle the casualty of faith; leaders or strong believers who deviate from faith without neglecting either the grace or the integrity? How can a church handle a leader who impregnates a lady, carries some members to sorcerers, and is indirectly or directly involved in murder and other lethal sins? Certainly, there can't be a single answer to such complex issues, since each church has its *modus operandi* in regard to disciplinary measures. However, the appeal of this paper is to point to grace as means to integrity in handling the casualty of faith.

Managing Casualty of Faith in the Church Today

The church as we see it today is believed to have two domains in this fallen world. There is the domain of struggle with Satan and his hosts and the domain of the victorious Saints. In this world of struggles as a visible church, she sees herself as a militant church which engages in battles with the devils. As usual in the battle field there are bound to be casualties of various degrees. However, in the life hereafter the church sees herself as a triumphant Church that overcomes the affairs of this world.

Therefore, in the opinion of this paper, ministers and believers who commit mortal or lethal sins should be regarded as casualties of faith who in the war front suffer injury in the hands of Satan. A casualty is one injured, killed, captured, or missing in a war.... (*The Complete Christian Dictionary* 91 and *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* 201). This is exactly the picture of the church in this world. Since the visible church is a militant church, these erring brethren should be regarded as casualties of faith. Those who are badly wounded deserve spiritual rehabilitation as obtainable in the military set up among many nations around the globe. Those who are missing or captured are the ones who could not withstand the battle. These are the ones who surrendered to the devil. They can best be compared with the seeds that fell on the path, on the rock and among the thorns in the Parable of the Sower (Matt 13:1-9, 18-23). In this regard the paper categorizes the casualty of faith in the militant church into two: The ministers/pastors who are regarded as commanders in the church and the parishioners who are under ministers.

- a. Those ministers/pastors who sustain deadly injury in the militant church are those who commit grave offences. They include, those pastors who get involved in adultery, murder, incest, bestiality, homosexuality, lesbianism among others. These sins according to orthodox teachings through the Scripture have grave consequences and will taint a person involved particularly in African Christianity. The scar of such sins in Africa worldview is hard to be obliterated. The stigmatization associated with them usually causes some churches to rid a minister of his office because it is somehow considered to be an anathema in African worldview for a pastor/bishop/leader to be involved in any of such dreaded sin. Where excommunication is necessary it can be employed especially in the case of impenitence. Disciplinary measures are taken by various churches to correct the erring ministers to ensure decency and maintain the integrity of the church. In this case the grace of God should be employed to rehabilitate the offender where the person involved shows a deep sense of remorse after a period of discipline. There should not be rebaptism because it is undermining the grace of God. He has not committed a sin against the Holy Spirit. He is like a soldier who was badly injured in war front and needed rehabilitation. Ridding a leader of his office depends solely on the tenets of a church and the gravity of the sin. Of course, churches differ when it comes to dealing with culprits of this nature, but church leaders should always bear in mind that they are stewards in God's vineyard and not judges. Though this may not rule out accusation from the radical groups but it will land the church on a safer ground before God who is the ultimate Judge.
- b. The second category of casualty has to do with parishioners. They may be involved in the above sins and other lethal sins but should be disciplined in line with the grace of God as prescribed in the Scriptures. In this case there is no rebaptism as in the view of zealots like the Donatists, Anabaptists and some new generation churches today who re-baptize members that join them from other denominations. This position appears to point to integrity and spiritual self-aggrandizement rather than grace which provide the basis for Christian faith. There should not be witch hunting of members who are suspects, but let the conscience of such penitents prick them of their sins and make them report themselves to God and to the church. Grace should take its rightful place in treating these casualties of faith in the church to

avoid spiritual terrorism. The church should encourage visitations and counseling to help the penitent parishioner regain her spiritual vigor in serving Christ. For we are what we are by the grace of God (1Cor 15:10)

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the Donatists' position which maintains integrity over grace is aimed at the works of self-righteousness which cannot lead to salvation. They justify their stand, saying that "*as God was one so was His church, and its hallmark was purity. The integrity of the church lay in the integrity of its members, sealed by baptism and working in concord with the bishops* (Frend 654). Of course there is a sense in this, but one needs to strike a balance by looking at grace as foundational to integrity. Without grace the integrity of the church or its members, amounts to nothing before God. All human righteousness is like filthy rag before God (Isa 64:6). This does not negate passages such Hebrew 12:14 which says, "... without holiness no one shall see the Lord," and Mathew 5:48 which says, "... Be perfect, as your heavenly father is perfect." Believers should know that our holiness and perfection should be seen in the light of Christ dwelling in us through his grace. In his thesis on *two kinds of righteousness*, Martin Luther talks about alien and proper righteousness which all depend on divine grace (148). This means Christ righteousness which is an alien righteousness has been imputed in us and stirred up the proper righteousness in us that has been weakened by sin. As earlier noted grace humbles a church and causes the church to love everyone and also makes God's favour rest upon the church. It does not tolerate sin. But where sin increases grace increases to rescue life unto salvation (Rom 5:20-21).

When Augustine says; that adulterer, murderer, liar or criminal who is performing sacraments is not the one but Christ. His intention is for the church to see Christ who is the author and the perfecter of Christian faith in every Sacrament (Heb 12:2). In citing Augustine, Green rightly says, *that person whom the drunkard baptized, those whom a murderer baptized, those whom an adulterer baptized, if it were the baptism of Christ, Christ baptized*. Green continues citing Augustine as saying, *Jesus still baptizes; and as long as we must be baptized, Jesus baptizes. Let a man approach confidently to a lesser minister, for he has a superior teacher* (Green 267). For Christ alone is the superior. In this sense Augustine was not in any way supporting the erring Ministers but expressing the helpless state of man in terms of total depravity in which grace alone provides the way to salvation. As a mark of true church, sin should not be tolerated, not even in the days of Augustine.

Richard Baxter quotes Seneca assaying; he who *excuses sins transmits them to the posterity*, and *he who spares the guilty harm the good* (105-106). Sparing sin will harm the church and of course contaminates it by casting a shadow on its peculiarity and uniqueness in the face of the world. Therefore, sin must be dealt with in the church under the lenses of grace in accordance with the teaching of the Scriptures because the church is a mixture of Tares and Wheat, the good and bad fish. Donatists schism in North Africa was a negative phenomenon, but it helps both the ancient and the contemporary church to be proactive in handling some of its doctrinal problems by depending on grace. In this regard grace alone should prevail over integrity because integrity is a product of grace.

This paper is great. I have used it to teach the Early Church. Highly recommended for the journal.

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