

Donatism

Donatism was a Christian [sect](#) leading to a [schism](#) in the Church, in the region of the [Church of Carthage](#), from the fourth to the sixth centuries. Donatists argued that [Christian](#) clergy must be faultless for their ministry to be effective and their prayers and [sacraments](#) to be valid. Donatism had its roots in the long-established Christian community of the [Roman province Africa Proconsularis](#) (present-day [Tunisia](#), the northeast of [Algeria](#), and the western coast of [Libya](#)) and [Mauretania Tingitana](#) (roughly with the northern part of present-day [Morocco](#)),^[1] in the [persecutions of Christians under Diocletian](#). Named after the Berber Christian bishop [Donatus Magnus](#), Donatism flourished during the fourth and fifth centuries.^[2] Donatism mainly spread among the indigenous [Berber](#) population,^[3] and Donatists were able to blend Christianity with many of the Berber local customs.^[4]



Charles-André van Loo's 18th-century
Augustine arguing with Donatists

Origin and controversy

The Roman governor of North Africa, lenient to the large Christian minority under his rule throughout [the Diocletianic Persecutions](#), was satisfied when Christians handed over their [scriptures](#) as a token repudiation of faith. When the persecution ended, Christians who did so were called [traditores](#)—"those who handed (the holy things) over"—by their critics (who were mainly from the poorer classes).^[5]

Like third-century [Novatianism](#),^[6] the Donatists were [rigorists](#); the church must be a church of "saints" (not "sinners"), and sacraments administered by *traditores* were invalid. In 311 [Caecilian](#) (a new bishop of [Carthage](#)) was consecrated by [Felix of Aptungi](#), an alleged *traditor*. His opponents consecrated [Majorinus](#), a short-lived rival who was succeeded by Donatus.^[7]

Two years later, a commission appointed by [Pope Miltiades](#) condemned the Donatists. They persisted, seeing themselves as the true Church with valid sacraments. Because of their association

with the [Circumcellions](#), the Donatists were repressed by Roman authorities. Although they had local support, their opponents were supported by Rome and by the rest of the Catholic Church. The Donatists were still a force during the lifetime of [Augustine of Hippo](#), and disappeared only after the seventh- and eighth-century [Muslim conquest](#).^[8] The Donatists refused to accept the sacraments and [spiritual authority](#) of priests and bishops who were *traditores* during the persecution. The *traditores* had returned to positions of authority under [Constantine I](#); according to the Donatists, sacraments administered by the *traditores* were invalid.

Whether the [sacrament of Penance](#) could reconcile a *traditor* to full communion was questioned, and the church's position was that the sacrament could. The church still imposed years- (sometimes decades-) long public [penance](#) for serious sins. A penitent would first beg for the prayers of those entering a church from outside its doors. They would next be permitted to kneel inside the church during the [Liturgy](#). After being allowed to stand with the congregation, the penitent would finally be allowed to receive the [Eucharist](#) again. According to Donatists, apostasy would permanently disqualify a man from church leadership.^[9]

The validity of sacraments administered by priests and bishops who had been *traditores* was denied by the Donatists. According to Augustine, a sacrament was from God and *ex opere operato* (Latin for "from the work carried out"). A priest or bishop in a state of [mortal sin](#) could continue to administer valid sacraments.^[10] The Donatists believed that a repentant apostate priest could no longer consecrate the Eucharist. Some towns had both Donatist and Orthodox congregations.

Impact

The sect developed and grew in North Africa, with unrest and threatened riots in Carthage connected to the bishop controversy.^{[11][a]} Constantine, hoping to defuse the unrest, gave money to the non-Donatist bishop [Caecilian](#) as payment for churches damaged or confiscated during the persecution. Nothing was given to the Donatists; Constantine was apparently not fully aware of the seriousness of the dispute, which his gift exacerbated.^[11] The Donatists appealed to Rome for equal treatment; Constantine tasked Miltiades with resolving the issue, which led to the 313 commission. The Donatists refused to abide by the decision of the Roman council, demanding that a local council adjudicate the dispute and appealing directly to Constantine. In a surviving letter, a frustrated Constantine called for what became the [first Council of Arles](#) in 314. The council ruled against the Donatists, who again appealed to Constantine. The emperor ordered all parties to Rome for a hearing, ruled in favor of Caecilian and warned against unrest.^[12] A delegation from Rome traveled to Carthage in a vain attempt to seek compromise. The Donatists fomented protests and street violence,^[13] refusing to compromise in favor of the Catholic bishop.

After the [Constantinian shift](#), when other Christians accepted the emperor's decision, the Donatists continued to demonize him. After several attempts at reconciliation, in 317 Constantine issued an edict threatening [death](#) to anyone who disturbed the imperial peace; another edict followed, calling for the confiscation of all Donatist church property. Donatus refused to surrender his buildings in [Carthage](#), and the local Roman governor sent troops to deal with him and his followers. Although the historical record is unclear, some Donatists were apparently killed and their clergy exiled.

Outside Carthage, Donatist churches and clergy were undisturbed.^[14] Constantine's efforts to unite the church and the Donatists failed, and by 321 he asked the bishops to show moderation and patience to the sect in an open letter.^[15] During the brief reign of [Julian](#), the Donatists were revitalized and, due to imperial protection, occupied churches and carried out atrocities.^[16] Laws against the Donatists were decreed by [Valentinian I](#) after the defeat of the Donatist [usurper Firmus](#) in North Africa.

Opposition

[Augustine of Hippo](#) campaigned against Donatism as bishop; through his efforts, orthodoxy gained the upper hand. According to Augustine and the church, the validity of sacraments was a property of the priesthood independent of individual character. Influenced by the [Old Testament](#), he believed in discipline as a means of education.^[17]

In his letter to Vincentius, Augustine used the [New Testament Parable of the Great Banquet](#) to justify using force against the Donatists: "You are of opinion that no one should be compelled to follow righteousness; and yet you read that the householder said to his servants, 'Whomsoever ye shall find, compel them to come in.'"^[18]

In 409, Emperor [Honorius](#)'s secretary of state, [Marcellinus of Carthage](#), issued a decree which condemned the Donatists as [heretical](#) and demanded that they surrender their churches. This was made possible by a *collatio* in which St. Augustine legally proved that Constantine had chosen the Nicene church over the Donatists as the imperial church. The Donatists were persecuted by the Roman authorities to such a degree that Augustine protested their treatment.^[19]

The [Council of Trent](#) (1545-1563) taught that in the divine sacrifice of the [Holy Mass](#) "is contained and immolated, in an unbloody manner, the same Christ that offered Himself in a bloody manner upon the [altar](#) of the Cross. Hence, it is the same victim, the same sacrificing-priest who offers Himself now through the ministry of priests and who once offers Himself upon the Cross." The worth of the sacrifice does not depend on the celebrating priest (or bishop), but on the "worth of the victim and on the dignity of the [chief priest](#)- none other than Jesus Christ Himself".^[20]

Decline

The effects of Augustine's theological success and the emperor's legal action were somewhat reversed when the [Vandals](#) conquered North Africa. Donatism may have also gradually declined because Donatists and orthodox Catholics were equally marginalised by the [Arian Vandals](#),^[21] but it survived the Vandal occupation and [Justinian I's Byzantine reconquest](#). Although it is unknown how long Donatism persisted, some Christian historians believe that the schism and its ensuing unrest in the Christian community facilitated the seventh-century [Muslim conquest](#) of the region.^[22]

Related groups and individuals

Donatism is associated with a number of other groups, including:

Some non-gnostic Donatist groups

- The [Rogatists](#) were a [pacifist](#) breakaway faction who rejected the excesses of the Circumcellions and Donatists.
- The Claudianists, who (with the Urbanists) were reconciled to the Donatists by Donatist Bishop [Primian of Carthage](#)
- [Ticonius](#) was an influential thinker who was expelled by the Donatists for his rejection of [rebaptism](#)^[23]
- Followers of [Maximian](#), who broke away from Donatism

Other Donatist groups influenced from some other precedent gnostic sects

- The [Circumcellions](#), a name based on *circum cellas euntes* ("going around [larders](#)") because of their practice of living among the peasants they sought to indoctrinate. They were a disparate series of extremist groups who regarded [martyrdom](#) as the supreme Christian [virtue](#) (disagreeing with the [Episcopal see of Carthage](#) on the primacy of [chastity](#), [sobriety](#), [humility](#), and [charity](#)). Attracted by their extremism, some Donatists found them useful allies. It is very likely that this breakaway group's condemnation of property and slavery, and advocacy of free love, canceling debt, and freeing slaves^[24] derived from [Carpocrates'](#) Doctrine of libertinage, the refusal of marriage, the abolition of social castes and the communion of goods.^[25]
- Apostolic churches, a sect emulating the [Apostles](#) about which little is known. But it is very plausible that they were influenced from precedent gnostic [Apotactics](#).^[26]

The other Donatist groups

In [Mauretania](#) and [Numidia](#), the splinter groups were so numerous that the Donatists could not name them all.^[7]

Bishops

The Donatists followed a succession of bishops:

- [Majorinus](#) (311–313)
- [Donatus Magnus](#) (313–355; exiled 347)
- [Parmenian](#) (355–391)
- [Primian](#) (391–393)
- [Maximianus](#) (393–394)
- [Primian](#) (394–c. 400)

Later influence

- Early [Kharijites](#), a strict sect of Islam in the same Berber region.^[27]

Epithet

For several centuries during the [High Middle Ages](#) and the [Reformation](#), accusations of Donatism were leveled against church-reform movements which criticized clerical immorality on theological grounds. The early reformers [John Wycliffe](#) and [Jan Hus](#) were accused of Donatism by their theological opponents. Wycliffe taught that the moral corruption of priests invalidated their offices and sacraments, a belief characterizing Donatism.^[28] Hus similarly argued that a prelate's moral character determined his ecclesiastical authority, a position his contemporaries compared to Donatism and condemned as [heresy](#) at the [Council of Constance](#).

During the Reformation, Catholic [Counter-Reformers](#) such as [Johann Eck](#) accused the [magisterial Reformers](#) of Donatism (although the latter had partially distanced themselves from Wycliffe's theology to avoid such a charge).^[29] Magisterial Reformers like [Ulrich Zwingli](#) labeled [radical Reformers](#), such as the [Anabaptists](#), as Donatists.^[30] Catholics were portrayed in Reformation rhetoric as [Pelagian](#), another early Christian heresy. In [Eastern Orthodoxy](#), the [Bezpopovtsy](#) (priestless) strain of [Old Believers](#) believed that because the Russian bishops acquiesced to [Patriarch Nikon](#)'s reforms they (and the other patriarchs) forfeited any claim to [apostolic succession](#).

Accusations of Donatism remain common in contemporary intra-Christian polemics. Conservative [Lutherans](#) are sometimes called Donatists by their liberal brethren, referring to their doctrine of church fellowship^[31] and their position that churches which deny that Jesus' body and blood are eaten during the [Eucharist](#) do not celebrate a valid [Lord's Supper](#).^[32]

See also

- [State church of the Roman Empire](#)
- [Meletius of Lycopolis](#)
- [Great Apostasy](#)
- [Kharjites](#)
- [Novatianism](#)
- [Maximian of Bagai](#)



Notes

- The remainder of this paragraph comes from [Frend 1952](#), who derived his chronology primarily from [Optatus' *Against the Donatists*](#) (one of the only surviving primary sources).

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External links

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