

THE EVOLUTION OF DONATIST THEOLOGY AS RESPONSE TO A CHANGING LATE ANTIQUE MILIEU

The Donatist Christians of North Africa in the fourth and fifth centuries have been treated variously throughout history according to the interpreter: selfish schismatics, vile heretics, controversy mongers, or even as victims of belligerent Roman policies. It seems, however, that a more accurate summation of the late antique phenomenon can be located within the writings of W.H.C. Frend; that is that being more than just a run-of-the-mill sectarian group; Donatism was actually “part of a revolution.”¹

Every revolution has its causes and Donatism is no different. The Donatist revolution was initiated and sustained by a potent mixture of religious fervor, economic and social tensions that pitted native North Africans against colonial Romans, as well as the idiosyncratic traditions from being one of the oldest forms of Latin Christianity.²

But what makes Donatism unique among so-called revolutions is the way in which its constitutive elements coalesced into a prolonged and easily-evolving political theology that enabled that form of North African Christianity to channel the socio-political yearnings and cultural influences of its native population into a theological-behavioral paradigm that was dynamic and potent. Donatist political theology, the combination of the North African theological tradition and social context, is that which can be said to underlie and influence the multifaceted, and seemingly inconsistent, evolution of the life, thought, and secular interactions of Christians in Late Roman Africa.

It was this political theology that partly explains the myriad complexities of Donatist maneuvers in interacting with the Roman Empire and Roman Catholics. What seems to have been a disparate network initiating an amalgam of blindly-driven activities in history is decipherable through comprehension of their composite creedal-political orientations.

¹ W.H.C. FREND, *The Donatist Church: A Movement of Protest in Roman North Africa* (Oxford, 1952), 336.

² See J. DANIÉLOU, *Les Origines du Christianisme latin. Histoire des Doctrines Chrétiennes Avant Nicée*, Vol. III (Paris, 1978), 32. Or see the English version: *The Origins of Latin Christianity*, trans. and ed. D. SMITH and J.A. BAKER (Philadelphia, 1978), 341-404.

The possibility of piecing together any sort of theological or political rationale today within the known history of the Donatist controversy is a difficult endeavor, but it would have been even more so one hundred years ago. Because of the considerable advances made in reconstructing the socio-political and economic realities that framed the Donatist world, particularly that of Paul Monceaux, W.H.C. Frend, and Serge Lancel, it is possible today to arrive at a more adequate comprehension of the external forces that supplied the basis for the existence of Donatism and its successes.

Corollary with the advances of those twentieth century scholars, a more penetrative reconstruction of the Donatist theological schema became possible. This fact is evident in the breakthrough research of Gary Willis, Peter Brown, and Maureen Tilley, who have been successful in piecing together a more coherent and satisfactory account of the diverse religious motivations and undercurrents at work within Donatism and Roman North Africa, than has otherwise been available since the time of Augustine of Hippo in the fifth century.

The time has come where it is finally feasible to link the extent original sources from Donatist Christians with the aforementioned research into the socio-political and theological realities of fourth and fifth century North Africa. As such, the focus of this paper will be to identify and articulate Donatist (political) theology.

As stated before, deducing such a political theology (which has heretofore never been attempted as such) is a complicated objective. And before this process can be initiated, it is prudent to declare what is meant by “political theology” within the context of my research.

By “political theology”, I hope to avoid the tendency of analyzing the subject through a disproportionately historical, theological, or political method. I also seek to bypass the trend of dismissing time-tested political philosophies and theological traditions often at work in the original sources, in favor of anachronistic or even simplistic revolutionary ideologies.

Instead, for this research, the description of political theology provided in the writings of Oliver O’Donovan works: “It postulates an analogy-not a rhetorical metaphor only, or a poetic image, but an analogy grounded in reality- between the acts of God and human acts, both of them taking place within the one public history...”³

³ O. O’ DONOVAN, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge, 1996), 2.

So to extrapolate such an “analogy” at work in Donatist sources, I will first analyze the historical record of Donatism and then seek from them scriptural themes, language, and theological models from which a Donatist political theology can be reconstructed.

In particular, I will present the historical foundations of Donatism since the phenomenon did not occur within a contextual vacuum. Then I will examine the beginnings of Donatist Christianity, especially during the Great Persecution of 303-305 and more formally in 311/12⁴ with the controversial election of Caecilian.⁵ Next, I will highlight the interaction between Donatist partisans and Constantine and his successors. Afterwards, I will illustrate the events surrounding the reign of Emperor Julian and the innovations that Donatism engendered in the closing decades of the fourth century, with particular attention given to the role of the Circumcellion movement and the militant regime of Gildo. Finally, I will report the developments that occurred in the opening decades of the fifth century which involved Augustine of Hippo and the joint-effort of Roman Catholic and Roman Imperial authorities to suppress the Donatist Church.

After examining the relevant events that a political theology can be traced from, I will then explicate and synthesize the joint theological-political substratum that is to be found within Donatist sources and answer whether or not a political theology exists. From this, a theological schema will be compiled that is two-fold, categorized into the general theological categories of ecclesiology and eschatology. This *eschatological ecclesiology* described below will also serve the purpose of illuminating Donatist foundational theology.⁶ One of the objectives of this research is to contribute, in part, to a more thorough and expansive understanding of the core thought of the North African church, which I argue is was motivated by their eschatological ecclesiology.

⁴ W.H.C FRENCH and K. CLANCY, “When Did the Donatist Schism Begin?” *Journal of Theological Studies* XXVII/1 (1977): 104-109.

⁵ M. TILLEY, *The Bible in Christian North Africa: The Donatist World* (Minneapolis, MN, 1997), 10, 18; H. CHADWICK, “Augustine,” in *The Cambridge History of Early Christian Literature*, ed. F. YOUNG, L. AYRES, A. LOUTH (Cambridge, 2004), 332.

⁶ The concept of political theology as foundational theology is adapted from a proposition of FRANCIS SCHLÜSSLER FIORENZA in which he argued that the political theology is constitutive of the overall theology in the Christian realm; see “Political Theology as Foundational Theology,” *The Catholic Theological Society of America Proceedings of the Thirty-Second Annual Convention* 32 (Toronto, 1977): 142-177. Another illuminating article on the theological core of Donatism is: J. ALEXANDER, “Donatistae,” in *Augustinus-Lexikon* 2, ed. C. MAYER (Basel, 1999): 622-638.

Furthermore, mindful that Donatism was not a “monolithic, apocalyptic community of pure Christians seeking martyrdom”⁷ or a static theology which in fact adapted and changed as circumstances demanded as Tilley argues, how does one explain the evident decline in the public role and prestige of Donatism throughout North Africa after the Council of 411 up to the arrival of the Vandals in 429 through to the Arab occupation in the seventh century? Is it proper to even speak of a “decline” or “collapse” of Donatism at all? Is it possible instead that the events commonly understood to be the collapse of Donatism in the fifth century can instead be seen as a correction in the political theology of the Donatists away from the refuge of seeking to be the officially recognized state religion of North Africa (i.e., away from Rome) and instead a movement towards the traditional African Christian theological understanding of the Church as set apart from the fallen world by God?

By the end of this paper, it will be clear how history attests to the Donatist political theology to be at work in the choices of its membership. I will also be able to answer whether the demise of Donatism was, in part, because of the rejection of their own political theology, namely in the recourse to and espousal of Roman Imperial intervention which provided the basis for the eventual suppression of Donatist Christianity as a social force in North Africa.

Likewise, by the end of this paper, the historical record and theologies at play will have spoken for themselves. And by examining these respective elements in their context, I intend to avoid “the temptation to impose an academic consistency”⁸ on what the sources indicate about the dynamic interchange that occurred in the Donatist Controversy, instead allowing the voices and sources of Donatist North Africans to reveal their political theology.

I. TYPOLOGIES AND CATEGORIES OF DONATIST POLITICAL THEOLOGY

The history of the Donatist Controversy contains more than mere names, places, and dates of a mere schismatic group on the fringes of Romanized North Africa. The history of Donatism contains

⁷ TILLEY, *BCNA*, 8.

⁸ P. BROWN, “St. Augustine’s Attitude Towards Religious Coercion”, *Journal of Roman Studies* 54 (1964), 263, reprinted in Peter Brown, *Religion and Society in the Age of Augustine* (London, 1972): 260-278.

within its annals the pulse and life-blood of an entire culture which predated the Roman Empire's presence in North Africa. This pulse was manifested in the concrete beliefs and actions by North Africans towards the end of the existence of the Western Roman Empire. These actions and beliefs, when analyzed in connection with each other and within their particular context, form the crux of what can be classified as Donatist (political) theology.

This (political) theology is in no way abstract. It is to be found specifically in the activities of Donatist Christians. In their actions, beliefs, and faith a theology became realized in their late antique world. In acting in accord with their faith, they made the Biblical God they believed in intersect with their context, i.e., their time and place in the world.

The manner with which the Donatists brought about their God's intersection with the world, 'God's acts and human acts in the one public history', can be categorized into two overarching and interpenetrating categories that are deducible to an ecclesiology and an eschatology.

What will therefore be accomplished in this final segment is the synthesis of the said political theology from history into the three prescribed categories. The result of such a synthesis will be a nuanced method with which to peer into the theological depths of Donatist Christianity. By identifying their political theology, the readers will be exposed to Donatist foundational theology as well.

§1. Two Cities/ Societies

At the core of Donatist thinking was a foundational theology which consists of two substrata: ecclesiology and eschatology. The two categories are independently intelligible, but are also deeply interconnected and in fact contingent upon each other, thus forming an eschatological ecclesiology.

All the other myriad examples of Donatists beliefs made manifest in their history, that were often endemic to North African Christianity, e.g., rebaptism, emphasis on/ and pride in martyrdom and purity, insistence on the integrity of the Church and the sacraments, episcopal collegiality, and separation from secular authority (i.e., Rome), and the frequent sources of division and contention are not in and of themselves constitutive of their political/ foundational theology but rather derivative of Donatist eschatological ecclesiology.

More specifically, the two theological categoriae inform a concrete “superstructure,” that provided a context in the North African world within which the Donatist God and the revelation of whom could enter into the ‘public history’ of their niche in late antique civilization. This “superstructure” can be identified most simply in two allegorical cities or societies. North African tradition clearly illustrated the radical difference between those who had accepted the tradition of Christ with a deep, abiding faith in the Word of God and those who were at best ignorant of Christ and at worst, active persecutors of it. Their eschatological ecclesiology pitted the community of faith, among whom the Holy Spirit dwelled and enabled their understanding of the Scriptures, who made God present in their midst by their immediate response to prepare for Christ’s second coming (eschaton) against a city of the world in its shadow, populated by those who have not entered God’s ark of salvation and were threatened with damnation.

In order to advance a more certain comprehension of the ‘two cities’ superstructure as the context within which Donatist political/foundational theology (categorically divided into ecclesiology and eschatology) flourished, this paper will synthesize Donatist eschatology and ecclesiology separately in their compositional elements. The result will be that a nuanced theological/historical approach to understanding the Donatist phenomenon is appropriated.

A. *Donatist theology of the Church (ecclesiology)*

The notion of the nature of the Church in North Africa had a long period of gestation, dating back to at least Tertullian and possibly before him. Already in the late second and early third centuries, the concept of the Church as an alternative to the rest of the world had evolved *in nucleo*. By the time of Augustine, Donatist ecclesiological notions had changed considerably as the needs of North African Christians changed.⁹ Nonetheless, the belief in the Church as opposed to the world persisted in various degrees as Donatists’ eschatological notions expanded and contracted based on exterior pressures.

⁹ Donatist ecclesiological notions ranged from a sense of being the persecuted church of the martyrs to being God’s chosen *collecta* of God. And it was the image of *collecta* that served as the definitive and sustaining image for Donatist Christianity; TILLEY, *BCNA*, 178.

The historical Donatist understanding of the Church can be divided into roughly two over-lapping models: the church of the martyrs and as the collecta of Israel. This section will focus on those models, with the model of the church of the martyrs examined first.

1. Before Cirta

Scores and decades before the proto-Donatists ‘drew lines in the North African sand’ in 305 after the Great Persecution,¹⁰ there existed a theology of the Church deeply rooted in the model of the martyrs and in the Scriptures.¹¹

Tertullian, the grandfather of Donatism, elaborated upon the Latin African theology he had inherited and helped partly create.¹² Already in the early third century he articulated a vision of the Church as “the Bride of Christ, without spot or wrinkle.”¹³ Particular care was given to emphasize the separateness of the church from the world which included taking measures to safeguard sacramental life particularly the rite of baptism,¹⁴ and in extolling the heroic model of the martyrs.¹⁵ For these early proto-Donatists, defending the integrity of their faith was a deadly serious affair.¹⁶ They were prepared and exhorted to rally for their *fraternitas* of truth of “two or three...gathered together in the unity of the Spirit.”¹⁷

Tertullian bolstered these ideas with his integration of Roman methods of interpretation of the Bible.¹⁸ From this source, they found the Scriptures to be revealed to them through the Spirit directly in their circumstances.¹⁹ He also adopted a form of typological interpretation as part of his approach to the biblical literature,²⁰ whereby accounts of the past could illuminate the circumstances of the present or the future.

¹⁰ TILLEY, *BCNA*, 58.

¹¹ M. TILLEY, “The Ascetic Body and the (Un) Making of the World of the Martyr,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* LIX/3 (1991): 467-479.

¹² TILLEY, *BCNA*, 21.

¹³ CYPRIAN, *De Pudicitia*, 21, “non habentem maculam aut rugam”; *Gesta Colationis Carthaginensis* III.258.

¹⁴ TERTULLIAN, *De Baptismo*, 5 and *De Exhortatione Castitatis*, 7; G. WILLIS, *Saint Augustine and the Donatist Controversy* (London, 1950), 145-147.

¹⁵ CYPRIAN, *De Pudicitia*, 22.

¹⁶ In essence, a Christian must be prepared to defend one’s faith with one’s own life; TERTULLIAN, *De Spectaculis*, 1, “christianos, expeditum morti genus.” TERTULLIAN, *Ad Scapulam*, 5, “Nos haec non timere sed ultro vocare.”

¹⁷ TERTULLIAN, *Apologeticum*, 80.

¹⁸ TILLEY, *BCNA*, 21-23.

¹⁹ Matt. 22:43 and Acts 4:25.

²⁰ TILLEY, *BCNA*, 24,26.

In a sense, time was collapsed.²¹ The eschaton prophesied about in the Scriptures was no longer something of the distant future but possible now, as evidenced by the unprecedented experience of martyrdom for his community.²²

Tertullian's nuanced approach to typological interpretation of Scripture was particularly effective at enlisting potent models for the Church. He found Peter, Paul, and the Apostles to be exquisite examples of spiritual authority codified in the Christian faith by their efficacious martyrdoms, carried out in obedience to the Spirit.²³

North African ecclesial theology was advanced further during the episcopate of Cyprian (248/249-258).²⁴ The Bishop of Carthage made considerable developments in the tradition through his experience of persecution in the reign of Emperor Decius. As a result of those persecutions, enhanced attention was placed on notions such as the purity of the Church, the distinguishing differences between the Church and the world, and the exemplification of the martyrs in pronouncing the coming of the reign of Christ (eschaton) with the assurance of the presence of the Spirit.²⁵

Cyprian likewise contributed to the formation of the Donatist theology through his continuation and *nuancement* of the North African Biblical hermeneutic. It is certainly true that Cyprian was heavily indebted to Tertullian's influence; nonetheless he diverged in how the Bible was to be reappropriated for his church.²⁶ For one, Cyprian posited the continued inspiration of the Spirit in the life of the Church.²⁷ This specifically gave shape to the later Donatist model,

²¹ TILLEY, *BCNA*, 26.

²² TILLEY, *BCNA*, 42-43.

²³ TERTULLIAN, *De Pudicitia*, 16: "Paulum, columnam immobile discinarum." TERTULLIAN, *De Exhortatione Castitatis*, 4, "Proprie enim Apostoli Spiritum sanctum habent..."

²⁴ TILLEY, *BCNA*, 28.

²⁵ CYPRIAN, *Epistula*, 76.3, 5.

²⁶ Among the many points where Cyprian adopted Tertullian's biblical methodology and theological speculation were his belief in the unity of the Bible (albeit for Cyprian there was a hierarchy in the Bible: first the Gospels, then NT epistles, and then the OT) which confirmed and schematized typologies for the Church; M. FAHEY, *Cyprian and the Bible: A Study in Third-Century Exegesis*, *Cyprian and the Bible: A Study in Third-Century Exegesis* (Tübingen, 1971), 47. Too, Cyprian accepted that the Bible was the voice of the Spirit influencing the writer, *Ep.* 55.27. This aspect allowed for the illumination of passages alluding to Christ in the OT, especially the relationship between God and his nation Israel, the collecta, CYPRIAN, *De Catholicae Ecclesiae Unitate*, 2; *De Lapsis* 10; *Dominica Oratione*, 15; *Ep.* 58.1; *Ep.* 63.17.

²⁷ CYPRIAN, *Ep.* 66.10; PONTIUS, *Vita Cypriani*, 12-13.

whereby it was viewed that the Spirit rendered communication in interpreting texts. The needs of the community would be able to be guided in their changing circumstances.²⁸

Secondly, Cyprian concluded that Scripture did not provide anecdotal evidence for living a just life, but actually gave God's commands.²⁹ This meant that the life and thought of the Church was able to be directed by the orders of God. This concept too would be used liberally by Donatists later, as was his facile use of the Bible as a unified text.³⁰

Cyprian's system of biblical interpretation proved to be a potent mix, especially when combined with the literal and typological reading of the Bible he had inherited from Tertullian.

Perhaps one final remark about Cyprian's contribution to the ecclesiological tradition of Donatism would be about the bountiful examples of typologies he integrated into the tradition of the North African Church. For Cyprian, the figures in the Old Testament were not only types for the New Testament but also for his congregation.³¹ So not only were Christ, the sacraments, and the Church rooted typologically speaking,³² but so were the martyrs.³³ For Cyprian, like Tertullian and later the Donatists, the martyrs had a position of authority. However, it was not simply by the fact of martyrdom that martyrs were attributed authority, but because they were like the disciples, i.e., aided by the spirit:

Beware of people; for they will hand you over to the assemblies and they will flog you in their synagogues. And you shall stand before kings and officials giving testimony to them and to the nations for my sake. And when they hand you over, do not think about how or what you shall say. What you are to say will be given to you at that time. For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father who is speaking in you.³⁴

²⁸ TILLEY, *BCNA*, 31-32.

²⁹ P. MONCEAUX, *Histoire Littéraire de l'Afrique Chrétienne Depuis les Origines Jusqu'à l'Invasion Arabe. Tome Deuxième. Saint Cyprien et Son Temps* (Paris, 1902), II. 317.

³⁰ TILLEY, *BCNA*, 32.

³¹ CYPRIAN, *Ad Fortunatum* 4.

³² Tilley points out that Cyprian found a basis in the OT for among other things: (1) baptism, *Ep.* 69.2, *Ep.* 79.11, *Ep.* 70.1; (2) Christ, *Testimoniorum* 1.8, 2.1; *Ep.* 63.6; (3) Eucharist, *Ep.* 63.3, 4-6, 11; (4) priesthood, *Ep.* 59.4, 5, *Ep.* 77.4; (5) the Church, *Test.* 1.19, 1.20; *Unit.* 4, *Dom.* 5, *Ep.* 74.11, 75.15.

³³ CYPRIAN, *Ep.* 59.5-6.

³⁴ *Matt.* 10:17-20 in CYPRIAN, *Ep.* 10.3-4; cf. *Ep.* 57.5, 76.5.

In Cyprian's favorite verses he codified the North African belief in martyrs as being true interpreters of the Word of God, living exegesis.³⁵ For Cyprian the Church is rooted in its present experience with typologies of the martyrs. Abel, the three youths in Daniel, the Maccabean brothers were examples or types of the martyrs today.³⁶ Their position was forecasted in the words of the prophets, presented by Jesus Christ, performed by the apostles, and made manifest in contemporary North Africa through the advocacy of the Holy Spirit.³⁷

The final period of development for the North African view of their Church as the persecuted ark of salvation occurred in the span of time between Cyprian's death (258) and roughly the Great Persecution (303-305).

The literary record of martyrdom accounts of the time indicates a certain degree of solidification around the identification of the Church with martyrs. In short, persecution became to be seen as a mark of the true Church as the fledgling Christians to make sense of persecution and to define a path to withstand their tribulations.³⁸

As was found above with Tertullian, the *Passio Perpetuae* was crucial in articulating an understanding of the Church in troubled times. The *Passio* established the Donatist literary genre, particularly with its rich application of biblical imagery of the Last Days. An eschatological ecclesiology was emphasized in this early North African work, replete with biblical imagery of the Devil and with the idea that the 'end of days' was now upon them.³⁹ The martyrs assumed the role of the latter-day saints, and the church of these martyrs was assured of protection as the elect of God.⁴⁰

Later in the third century evidence surfaces that the North Africans view of ecclesiology began to change from a higher to lesser eschatology commensurate with the reality of having to persist day after day without the certainty of martyrdom.⁴¹

From the *Vita Cypriani* and *Acta Proconsularia* (268), the eschaton became less of an immediate reality as it was in the *Passio*

³⁵ TILLEY, *BCNA*, 10.

³⁶ CYPRIAN, *Ep.* 10.4; *Ep.* 58.5.

³⁷ CYPRIAN, *Ep.* 10.4.

³⁸ Tilley indicates that the Bible was crucial for the Donatists in the period too as it provided imagery and theological depth necessary to keep the Christians united and able to comprehend their situation in the face of danger; TILLEY, *BCNA*, 41, 50.

³⁹ *Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis*, in *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, trans. H. MUSURILLO (Oxford, 1972), 4.4; 12.1-7; 20.10.

⁴⁰ *Pass. Perp.* 4.3.

⁴¹ TILLEY, *BCNA*, 45.

Perpetuae but nonetheless the centrality of the martyrs remained, especially the example of Cyprian,⁴² explained through the use of new typologies: the ministration of the angels in Daniel to elaborate Cyprian's utter dependence on God, the suffering of Job, the works of Tobias, the reliance of Elijah on God,⁴³ and even Christ's passion as the model for Cyprian especially in the temptation to flee persecution and death, the arrest in the garden, and examination by the Roman official before the crowds.⁴⁴

The transformation to a model of the Church as a quotidian reality was furthered in a contemporary document, the *Passio Sanctorum Mariani et Iacobi* (259). Although this Numidian account, from Cirta, utilizes eschatological terms similar to those in the *Passio Perpetuae* such as epidemics, trumpets calls, latter-day saints, earthquakes, plagues, and horsemen of the apocalypse, the account differs from ancestral stories by its clearly Cyprianic influence whereby the martyrs were credited not only for their self-sacrifice but also because of their continuation of revelatory prophecy and the vicarious contribution of strengthening Christians for the path ahead by their example, which indicates that martyrdom was beginning to be understood as unnecessary for the continuation of the Church.⁴⁵

This transition was again reiterated by another Proconsular account of the time. The *Passio Sanctorum Montani et Lucii* evidences a near complete change from worries about exterior threats to the Church and instead focuses on internal fissures rent by the devil, or the 'Evil One', responsible for interior schisms within the Christian community.⁴⁶ By this time the martyrs were used to emphasize "endurance to the end and solidarity in times of stress."⁴⁷ In the years directly

⁴² *Acta Proconsularia* 2 (CSEL. 3/3. CXI); PONTIUS, *Vita Cyp.* 11; TILLEY, *BCNA*, 44.

⁴³ PONTIUS, *Vita Cyp.* 3, 10, 11.

⁴⁴ PONTIUS, *Vita Cyp.* 14-18.

⁴⁵ Tilley illustrates this point with a direct reference from the *Passio Sanct. Mont. Luc.* (10.2, 11.1-7, 14.5; MURSILLO, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 196): "When they were on the point of waging their sublime struggle against the distresses of a cruel world and against the pagan onslaughts, it was their wish that their battle, which they had joined under the influence of the Spirit in heaven, should be communicated to their fellow citizens through me. And they did this not because that wanted the glory of the martyr's crown to be arrogantly broadcast, but rather that the ordinary men [sic] who constituted God's people might be given strength in the test of faith by the sufferings of those who had gone before."

⁴⁶ *Pass. Sanct. Mont. Luc.* 10.2; 11. 1-7; 14.5 (MURSILLO, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 222-24, 26).

⁴⁷ The *Pass. Sanct. Mont. Luc.* indicates a completed break from the earlier forms of martyr stories as it uses no apocalyptic message. Instead to ease the anxiety of the

before the Cirta council in 305, the early development of North African ecclesiology had concluded. What had started as a heavily apocalyptic eschatology-focused conception of the Church defined by its martyrs had gradually changed into a Church that relied heavily on biblical models for stability. At the same time that being a Christian in public became more common-place, it also started to become necessary for Christians to distinguish themselves from the rest of the world. This is observable in the last specimens of martyr stories in the pre-Circa era.

The *Acta Maximiliani* (298) provided an account of a Roman soldier who was executed for refusing to continue his service to the Empire and hence commit an idolatrous act: "I cannot fight...for I am Christian."⁴⁸ Biblical imagery was used to support the separation of Christians from the world. In this case, Maximilian could not bear the military insignia for he bore the mark of Christ just as the saint in the Book of Revelation.⁴⁹ At the same time in Mauretania, the *Acta Marcelli* described another soldier who forthrightly renounced his duty to Rome to avoid idolatry through the symbolic public divestment of his military uniform. Instead of resorting to the typologies in past martyr stories that lent one to passively accept death, the *Acta Marcelli* placed significant importance on Maccabean typology for its defiant stand against oppression and confident confession of faith in creedal form.⁵⁰ This movement of bold action in response to state persecution was a literary water-shed for North Africa.⁵¹

community, the example of Cyprian is used to appease the fear of execution (*Pass. Mont. Luc.* 21.3-4; MURSILLO, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 234), the Good Thief at Jesus' Passion who asked to be remembered when Jesus entered his kingdom is typologized (*Pass. Mont. Luc.* 13.5-6), as well as the Maccabean matriarch and the hemorrhaging woman in Lk. 8:24-33 (*Pass. Mont. Luc.* 16.3-5; MURSILLO, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 230), and the three youths in Daniel (*Pass. Mont. Luc.* 3.4; MURSILLO, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 216) to serve as types of confidence and endurance under the pressure of death.

⁴⁸ *Acta Max.* 1.3 (MUSURILLO, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 244).

⁴⁹ Rev. 7:2 in *Acta Max.* 2.4 (MURSILLO, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 246).

⁵⁰ 2 Macc. 7:13 and 4 Macc. 9:9, in *Pass. Mont. Luc.* 14.1 (MURSILLO, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 226).

⁵¹ This bold action was followed up in another contemporary document, the *Acts of Saint Felix Bishop and Martyr*, based on the Great Persecution in 303. Although the biblical typologies common in prior documents was absent, it strongly followed the developing tradition found in the *Acta Marcelli* with the document's insistence on defiance in the face of persecution and the continued emergence of the theme of the separation, and indeed superiority, of the Christian faith over the secular world. This is particularly clear in the dialogue between Felix and his Roman interrogator Magnilianus: "Magnilianus the curator said, "Turn over whatever books or parchments you have." Felix the bishop said, "I have them but I won't turn them over." Magnilianus

By the time of composition of the final two martyr stories before the Great Persecution, ecclesiological considerations had driven the authors of the *Acta Crispinae* (303/304) and the *Passio S. Typasii Veterani* to all together ignore martyrdom as Christians began to deepen their sense of the nature of the Church define by their identity of separateness from the *saeculum*, which essentially replaced the role of the martyr.⁵²

2. After Cirta

After the Council of Cirta (305) the outrage felt by the supporters of the recent martyrs and confessors towards the oppressors and cooperative clergy manifested itself in a split that formally matured into schism in 311. This split pitted agitated North African Christians who, in line with their tradition, were growing apart from the secular world against a minority who saw the future of the church at peace with the temporal regime.

The split between these groups was also definitive in articulating the desire of separation from the world in North African ecclesiology. The central description of the moment in Donatist history is preserved in the *Acts of the Abitinan Martyrs (Passio Ss. Dativi, Saturini presbyteri et aliorum)*.⁵³ The martyrdom account, which actually fails to describe the actual martyr's executions since martyrdom had become less emphasized in place of ecclesial separateness by that time (304-311),⁵⁴ evidences a distinctive change in how the Church was beginning to be understood. Not only did the incident described in its pages spur the rise of two churches but also concretized "Donatist self-identity and provided the impetus for a hermeneutical shift that ensured the survival of the Donatist "church of the martyrs" long after there were no more martyrs."⁵⁵

The *Acts of the Abitinan Martyrs* captured this hermeneutical shift by reporting the complete division between true Christians and

the curator said, "It is better for me to be burned in the fire than the sacred scriptures, because it is better to obey God than any human authority (Acts 5:29)." Magnilianus the curator said, "What the emperor ordered takes priority over what you say." Felix the bishop said, "The Lord's command takes priority over human authority", *The Acts of Saint Felix Bishop and Martyr* §3, in M. TILLEY, *Donatist Martyr Stories: The Church in Conflict in Roman North Africa*. Translated Texts for Historians, vol. 24 (Liverpool, 1996), 9-10.

⁵² TILLEY, *BCNA*, 48-50.

⁵³ TILLEY, *DMS*, introduction, XI.

⁵⁴ TILLEY, *BCNA*, 58.

⁵⁵ TILLEY, *BCNA*, 11.

false ones. Lines had certainly then been drawn in the North African sand, with an ecclesiology intertwined with condemnation of *traditio* and the importance of the example of the martyrs. The Donatists had kept the faith, fought and died for the Word of God and have honored the martyrs while the false Christians betrayed God's Church:

Some fell from faith at the critical moment by handing over to unbelievers the scriptures of the Lord and the divine testaments so they could be burned in unholy fires. But how many more in preserving them bravely resisted by freely shedding their blood for them! When the devil had been completely defeated and ruined and all the martyrs were filled with God's presence, bearing the palm of victory over suffering, they sealed with their own blood the verdict against the traitors and their associates, rejecting them from communion of the Church. For it was not right that there should be martyrs and traitors in the Church of God at the same time.⁵⁶

A final foray into this period highlights again the growing sense of separateness characteristic of Donatist ecclesiology. *The Passio Ss. Maximae, Donatillae, et Secundae* (304) and the *Sermo de passione Ss. Donati et Advocati* (317-321), two post-Cirta documents, provide evidence of a clear movement in the ecclesiological transformation of Donatism as well.

By the time these writings had arisen, eschatological language found previously in North African martyrdom accounts had nearly disappeared and an effort was made to downplay the theme of unity among Christians, more so in the latter than in the former.⁵⁷ As the occasions of martyrdoms decreased, the Donatist reliance on the Bible to understand their context as a large group in ordinary circumstances increased.⁵⁸ The Donatists defined their church with biblical typologies meant to differentiate themselves from *traditores* and the *saeculum*. They did this through labeling their opponents scribes and Pharisees, idolaters and worshippers of Nebuchadnezzar,⁵⁹ Caiaphas,⁶⁰ Judas, pseudo-Christ and pseudo prophets.⁶¹ As the prospect of sustaining Donatist group cohesion lessened through identification as *ecclesia martyrorum*, these Christians revamped their ecclesiology to be validated through the Scriptures as God's own collecta, separated from the follies of the world.

⁵⁶ *Acts of the Abitinian Martyrs*, §2, in TILLEY, *DMS*, 29.

⁵⁷ TILLEY, *BCNA*, 63-64.

⁵⁸ TILLEY, *BCNA*, 62-63.

⁵⁹ Dan. 3:7 in *Pass. Max.* 1 (TILLEY, *DMS*, 17-24); TILLEY, *BCNA*, 64.

⁶⁰ Matt. 26:63 in *Pass. Max.* 2 (TILLEY, *DMS*, 52-60); TILLEY, *BCNA*, 65.

⁶¹ *Sermon Given on the Passion of Saints Donatus and Advocatus*, 1 (*DMS*. 52-60; *PL*. 753A).

B. *The elect of God and Collecta of Israel*

From the reign of the Christian Emperor Constantine to the end of the fourth century the Donatists were forced to continually streamline their *raison d'être* in a milieu where being a 'Christian' was becoming the norm in the Roman Empire.⁶² Donatists in this period found success in maintaining their church in both good and bad times by solidifying their use of biblical typology of the Church as the *collecta* of Israel who obeyed the Laws of God, separated from those who did not.⁶³ Their church was a 'garden enclosed, a sealed fountain' (Cant. 4:12),⁶⁴ the Ark of salvation (Gen. 6-9) sealed against the outside world.⁶⁵ The Church is understood as the 'inside' (*intus*) and the world as 'outside' (*foris*) with light, godliness, and purity within and darkness, godlessness, and sin on the outside in the world. The "darkness will not mix with light, gall with honey; life will not mix with death nor innocence with guilt..."⁶⁶

For the Donatists at that point, the "sacred and secular were two separate spheres, each contained within its own sociological milieu: the Church of the pure face-to-face with a hostile, persecuting world, with secular society and the Roman government, and with an apostate Church which had come to terms with them. The 'secular' was irretrievably 'profane.'"⁶⁷ In this context it was Donatist North Africa where God and the Church resides (Habakkuk 3:3), and the north is where the devil and the *saeculum* are found (Is. 14:15).⁶⁸

1. Between Constantine and Parmenian

Between 346 and 348, the distance which North African ecclesiology went in leaving behind the definition of their church as the *ecclesia martyrorum* and in accepting their church as the *collecta* is

⁶² M. TILLEY, "Sustaining Donatist Self-Identity: From the Church of the Martyrs to the *Collecta* of the Desert," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 5:1 (Baltimore, 1997): 21-35.

⁶³ TILLEY, *BCNA*, 65.

⁶⁴ CYPRIAN, *Ep.* 69.2, 74.11; OPTATUS, *De Schismate*, I.10; II.13; AUGUSTINE, *Contra Cresconium grammaticum partis Donati* I.34-40, IV.63.77. See also R.A. MARKUS, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine* (Cambridge, 1970), 112.

⁶⁵ AUGUSTINE, *Ad Catholicos Epistulae de Secta Donatistarum*, 5.9.

⁶⁶ AUGUSTINE, *Contra Litteras Petilianus*, II.39.92.

⁶⁷ MARKUS, *Saeculum*, 122.

⁶⁸ H. CHADWICK, "Donatism," 383.

evident as they entered a cycle of calm times as well as times of moderate turbulence from the state. In two martyrdom accounts from this period, the *Sermo de passio Maximiani et Isaac* and the *Passio Benedicti Martyris Marculi* (347), no eschatological motifs are used⁶⁹ and in its place were instead typologies of the collecta such as the parable of the laborers in the vineyard (Matt. 20:1-16),⁷⁰ who are always on the alert (“He says, ‘I sleep while my heart keeps watch.’” [Cant.5:2; Gen. 22]⁷¹ against the Catholic *tyrannus* and *carnifex* as well as the Jews who had conspired with idolaters.⁷² Indeed, the watchword of Donatism had become *separatism* with martyrdom a rare and distant reality.⁷³

The last decades of the fourth century brought new challenges to the leadership of the Donatist Church and the same holds true for its ecclesiology. With the arrival of Emperor Julian and the subsequent ascension of the Donatist Church as the majority religion in North Africa, it became impossible to use the same ecclesiological paradigms any longer. As such, the church had to constantly redefine itself through the notion of separateness from the world and the worldly Catholics, the *sine qua non* for the survival of the Donatist Christians.⁷⁴

2. After Parmenian and up to the Council of Carthage of 411

Parmenian’s most significant contribution was his implementation of policies to encourage inclusivity towards non-Donatists, including Rogatists and Catholics. The ‘dotes’ theology of Parmenian was an attempt by Parmenian to broaden the ecclesiology of the church in order that more could enter into it, specifically by rejecting the notion of the Donatist Church as the church of the pure.⁷⁵ The idea of a church of the pure was deflated by Parmenian’s explanation that personal sin, particularly that of a minister, was of less importance in conferring a

⁶⁹ TILLEY, *BCNA*, 74.

⁷⁰ *Pass. Maximiani* (DMS. §11; *PL.* 8.771); TILLEY, *BCNA*, 73.

⁷¹ *Pass. Maximiani* (DMS. §8; *PL.* 8.770B); TILLEY, *BCNA*, 75.

⁷² 2 Macc. 7:29, Matt. 26:57 in *Passio Marculi* (*PL.* 8.761A-B, 762B, 763D, 765A); *Passio Maximiani* (*PL.* 8.769A); TILLEY, *BCNA*, 76.

⁷³ Tilley emphasizes this point to illustrate that concepts such as the church of the pure and the church of martyrs had fallen out of usage long before the Council of 411; TILLEY, *BCNA*, 179.

⁷⁴ M. TILLEY, “Donatus, Donatism,” in *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed. A. FITZGERALD (Grand Rapids, MI, 1999), 286.

⁷⁵ TILLEY, *BCNA*, 101, 179.

valid sacrament. What was paramount was membership in the authentic church, the one free of the stain of *traditio* and the contagion of the sons/ heirs of the *traditores*.⁷⁶ And it is this church that is identifiable by the dots theology. Perhaps Parmenian's contribution is best stated in the following:

The significant advance Parmenian made was to provide in a well-articulated form what had been heretofore only latent in Donatist ecclesiology, that is, it is not the personal holiness but the ecclesial affiliation of the minister of the sacrament that is necessary for validity.⁷⁷

The combination of Parmenian's ecclesiological innovation which strengthened the church position as the justifiable majority church in Africa was enabled further by his enhanced usage of biblically-based eschatology as a means of arguing for conversion to Donatist Christianity immediately, as the hour of judgment was sooner rather than later. Indeed Donatist theology under Parmenian matured as God's kingdom was to be realized in their immediate context.⁷⁸

Tyconius followed Parmenian in attempting to adapt Donatist ecclesiology to changing circumstances. Like Parmenian before him, Tyconius acknowledged the reality of sin in the Church. In his *Liber regularum*, *De Diable et corpora eius*, Tyconius moved to state that not only is sin a reality in the church, but actually an inherent element of it. As surely as there is north and south, the Church has a bipartite nature.⁷⁹ This bipartite nature, consisting of two 'peoples' or 'cities' exists as if one body as a *corpus permixtum* until the separation of the two cities or peoples at the Last Judgment, the eschaton.⁸⁰ This finding had pronounced results in advancing both for Donatist theology and other Latin Christianities. Augustine, a Roman Catholic, would adopt the '*corpus permixtum*' concept into Catholic thought, claiming its biblical basis. The *permixta ecclesia* was to be found in among other places, Christ's example of the parable of the tares interspersed with the wheat in the Gospel of Matthew (13: 47-48).⁸¹

⁷⁶ TILLEY, *BCNA*, 102-103, 106.

⁷⁷ TILLEY, *BCNA*, 106.

⁷⁸ For more on Parmenian's eschatological ecclesiology, see TILLEY, *BCNA*, 108-112.

⁷⁹ TYCONIUS, *Liber Regularum*. Texts and Translations 31. Early Christian Literature Series 7, trans. W. BABCOCK (Atlanta, 1989), §7 (pp. 72-75).

⁸⁰ MARKUS, *Saeculum*, 117.

⁸¹ AUGUSTINE, *De doctrina christiana*, III. 32.

This duality would find itself continually reappearing in Augustine's thought. His *Civitate Dei* is an outstanding example with its insistence on classifications such as the *civitas Dei peregrine* shadowed by *civitas terrena*, two realities in one existence until the return of Christ:

In this wicked world, and in these evil days...many reprobate are mingled in the Church with the good. Both are as it were collected as in the net of the Gospel; and in this world, as in a sea, both swim together without separation, enclosed in the net until brought ashore.⁸²

By the final decade of the fourth century, the ecclesiological advances of Parmenian and Tyconius were retarded as the Donatist Church and North Africa saw an unprecedented period of expansion of Donatist temporal power and a Catholic ascendancy afterwards. In the short time between the death of Parmenian in 392 and the Council of Carthage in 411, Donatist ecclesiology endured a series of setbacks as the new generation of leadership retreated from the pathways of Parmenian and Tyconius and instead resorted to an earlier ecclesial model of *ecclesia martyrorum* to handle the combined threat of the Catholic Church and renewed imperial intervention. This development was at the heart of the so-called defeat of Donatism in 411. By refusing to remain open to the fact of being the new majority church and adapting to changing circumstances in the 390s and 400s, Donatism was unable to do anything other than regressing. This event deeply and undeniably affected the existence of Donatist Christians in their daily life as their church became persecuted again; which deeply affected its political theology overall. Only by regaining a sense of being the collecta of Israel later in the 410s and 420s and beyond did Donatist Christianity regain its ecclesiological, and hence political-theological, bearings which enabled its persistent existence until the arrival of the Arab invasion in the seventh century.

§2. Eschatological Urgency

The centrality of Donatist ecclesiology as reviewed in the previous section was evident. Ecclesiology was at the heart of Donatism and the source of its theological dynamism in the fourth and fifth centuries as the church responded to ever-changing realities. Without the

⁸² AUGUSTINE, *De civitate Dei*, XVIII, 49. For further analysis on the Donatist influence on Augustine, see the excursus on Tyconius' influence on Augustine in: J. VAN OORT, *Jerusalem and Babylon: A Study Into Augustine's City of God and the Sources of His Doctrine of the Two Cities* (Leiden, 1991), ch. 4, sect. C.

Donatist Church's eschatological ecclesiology, it would not have been possible for the religion to adapt to changing from a persecuted minority to a powerful majority, from the model of an *ecclesia martyrorum* to the collecta of Israel.

But armed only with their ecclesiology the Donatist Christians would have remained powerless against the attacks and maneuvers of the more powerful and resourceful Romans and Catholics. Where Donatist put their faith into practice, or made their theoretical components of their theology play out in their context, and genuinely realized a political theology was by acting in accord with their eschatology: an eschatology of urgency. This eschatology which animated Donatist ecclesiology and theology as a whole into political theology also had as a by-product the source of many of the controversies that the Donatists encountered with the Catholics. It was by passionately defending the faith means of salvation, a matter of necessity for the Donatists that issues such as rebaptism, ecclesial affiliation, the integrity of ordination, and especially the activities of the Circumcelliones came to the fore.

In this final section, the Donatist eschatology will be analyzed in its respective parts and manifestations in order to complete the portrait of foundational political theology.

A. *The integrity of the Church*

One of the driving forces behind much of what Donatists said and did was their trademark sense of immediacy in achieving their agenda, and this was particularly true in articulating their eschatology.⁸³ Because Donatist theology held that Scripture was guiding their community in their contemporary experience to follow God's Law and because of their collective experience of the unpredictability of an encounter of martyrdom, the Church must adhere faithfully to the Word of God and act as if the final hour were upon them. This perhaps explains the level of seriousness the Donatists employed while defending and adhering to the ways in which God's revelation and will was actualized in their time and place as political theology.

⁸³ Parmenian was perhaps the best example of a Donatist who articulated the nearness or immediacy of Judgment Day. See TILLEY, *BCNA*, 111; M. TILLEY, "When Schism Becomes Heresy in Late Antiquity: Developing Doctrinal Deviance in the Wounded Body of Christ," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 15:1 (Baltimore, 2007), 18.

1. The Dignity of Ordination and Sacramental Transmission or Conference

Although the topic of the validity of ordination was a hot-button ecclesiological and sacramental subject from the time of the Circa council to well after the Council of Carthage in 411, it was also a particular concern for the Donatists' eschatology. The whole dilemma of whether a church was transmitting grace or *traditio* was a concern at the time the Donatist Church formally sprang into existence as a separate entity and reached its most cultivated expression with Parmenian. The error that the *traditores* committed occasioned the penetration of sin into the inner-life of the Church in a profound way. Those who opted against the Church, and instead for the world, had set themselves outside the safe confines of salvation. In the context where the Last Judgment was a much nearer reality than their Catholic counterparts believed, it was of the utmost importance to rectify *traditio* or risk damnation through disconnection from God's grace in the sacramental order.

Parmenian led the development of Donatist eschatology, and as with his ecclesiological work, relied again on typological references in the Bible. He used one particular parable, the parable of the vine and the branches (Jn. 15:1-8) to emphasize the necessity for Catholics to reconnect to the 'vine', the true Church:

Amongst other things you [Parmenian] have said that the schismatics [Catholics, *traditores*] have been cut off, like branches, from the vine, and they have been reserved, marked off for punishment, like dried wood, for the fires of hell [the Last Judgment].⁸⁴

For the Donatists worries about the Last Judgment were for the present, not the future. Conversion was necessary immediately!

Parmenian also used biblical typology to be unambiguous in allotting the designation of the legacy of *traditio* on the Catholics in North Africa. To Parmenian the Catholics were "the children of adulterers [who] do not grow up...false shoots cannot strike deep roots" (Wis. 3:16, 4:13).⁸⁵ The sons of the *traditores*, of those who forsake the fountain and dug broken cisterns for themselves (Jer. 2:13)⁸⁶ offer sacraments that must be avoided to escape contamination as directed by God "Let not the oil of the sinner anoint my head" (Ps. 140.5).⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Parmenian quoted by OPTATUS, *De Schismate*, 1.10.

⁸⁵ OPTATUS, *De Schismate*, 4.8.

⁸⁶ AUGUSTINE, *Contra Epistulum Parmeniani*, 2.10.20.

⁸⁷ OPTATUS, *De Schismate*, 4.7.

2. Rebaptism

Perhaps no other theological matter in the entire Donatist saga sparked as much reaction and was as prolific as the rebaptism controversy. In order to understand the reason behind why the Donatists so adamantly defended the North African tradition of reconciling those who had lapsed with a new baptism it seems that this too can be best explained best within the Donatist eschatological context.

The vast array of baptismal typologies used by the Donatists attests to their view that the Catholics had faulty sacraments and thus no access to the means of salvation, but what these typologies also attest to is the need for Catholics to come to be rebaptized as a matter of utmost urgency:

Heaven trembled because the people of God have done two malevolent deeds: they have abandoned the fountain of living water and they have dug for themselves leaky cisterns which cannot hold water.⁸⁸

For the Donatists, their political theology necessitated the gathering-in of those Christians in the world who were baptized with “living water which did not contain faith.”⁸⁹ The only solution, before it was too late, was to bring into the Donatist Church those outside it typified in John 19:34, into the real body of Christ where the real water of life flows.⁹⁰ This Body of Christ, the ark (Gen. 6:14), the walled in garden (Cant.4:12)⁹¹ is where one must be for the impending return of Christ. With the greatest sense of urgency possible, Donatist political theology motivated North Africans to bring about the conformity of all in their lands to the one “one Lord, one faith, one baptism.”⁹² Without a doubt, the matter of rebaptism is given a deeper meaning in the long debate between the Donatists and Catholics when it is brought in under the umbrella of the Donatist eschatological ecclesiology.

Augustine and the Catholic understanding of baptism was starkly opposed to the Donatists'. From their perspective, baptism is efficacious regardless of the dispositions of the minister because it the channeled grace of God at work in the sacrament.⁹³ It is this grace that imposes an indelible mark on the baptized that is permanent like a

⁸⁸ Jer. 2:13 in OPTATUS, *De Schismate*, 4.9.

⁸⁹ Jer. 5:18 in AUGUSTINE, *Cont. Ep. Parm.* 2.10.20; AUGUSTINE, *Cont. Cresc.* 2.23.28; AUGUSTINE, *Epistula ad Catholicos de Secta Donatistarum*, 23.64.

⁹⁰ AUGUSTINE, *Ep. ad Cath.* 24.68.

⁹¹ OPTATUS, *De Schismate*, 1.12; TERTULLIAN, *De pud.* 21.9; TERTULLIAN, *Unit.* 4.

⁹² Letter to the Ephesians, 4:5 in AUGUSTINE, *Cont. Cresc.* 1.28.33 (353), AUGUSTINE, *De Unico Baptismo contra Petilianum*, 10.17.

⁹³ AUGUSTINE, *In Ioannis Evangelium Tractatus*, 5.15; *De baptismo*, III.10.15.

branding of flesh.⁹⁴ Therefore, Augustine would accept Donatists back into the church without the condition of rebaptism.⁹⁵

3. The Collegiality of Church Leaders

Another way in which the Donatists realized their eschatological ecclesiology was in their insistence on ecclesial collegiality. This example is not as obvious in and of itself as the instances of rebaptism and the conference of sacraments. Only within the context where an urgent sense of the arrival of the Last Judgment where all the saved will be equals before God does this example make sense.

The first example of Donatist collegiality is that of the *seniores laici*. This group of lay people (who had an important role in two periods covered in this research, the scandal over the election of Mensurius in 311 and the controversy involving Primian in 393) remains highly elusive in history.⁹⁶ However, what seems to be clear is that within the North African Christian tradition there was for a considerable period of time a group of laymen alternately titled *fidelis seniores*,⁹⁷ *seniores plebis*,⁹⁸ *seniores christiani populi*,⁹⁹ *seniores laicorum*¹⁰⁰ in charge of collaboration with the bishops and material management.

From what records remain it seems that the main duties for the *seniores laici* involved administrative and disciplinary matters.¹⁰¹ Beyond the disciplinary involvements in 311 and 392/393,¹⁰² the group also acted as an oversight committee in reviewing the alleged traditio

⁹⁴ AUGUSTINE, *In Ioannis Evangelium Tractatus*, 6.15; *De baptismo*, I.4.5.

⁹⁵ AUGUSTINE, *Contra Epistulum Parmeniani*, 2.13; *De symbolo ad catechumenos*, 8.16.

⁹⁶ W.H.C. FREND, "The Seniores Laici and the Origins of the Church in North Africa," *Journal of Theological Studies* XII/2 (1961): 280-284. P. MONCEAUX opined that the group had a probable origin with the village chieftains in Numidia and Proconsularia; *Histoire Littéraire de l'Afrique Chrétienne Depuis les Origines Jusqu'à l'Invasion Arabe. Tome Troisième. Le IV^e Siècle, D'Arnobe à Victorin* (Paris, 1905), III.83.10.

⁹⁷ OPTATUS, *De Schismate*, I.17.

⁹⁸ *Gesta apud Zenophilium*, in *S. Optati Milevitani Libri VII* (CSEL. 26, ed. C. ZIWSA (Vienna, Prague, Leipzig, 1893), 189.

⁹⁹ *Acta Purgationis Felicis episcopi Autummitani*, CCSL. 26, ed. C. ZIWSA (Turnhout, 2000), 198, 201.

¹⁰⁰ *Breviarium Hipponense* [Breviary of the Council of Hippo] in *Concilia Africae A.345-A.525* (CCSL. 149, ed. C. MUNIER (Turnhout, 1974), can. 100; AUGUSTINE, *Epistula*, 78.

¹⁰¹ FREND, *Seniores Laici*, 281.

¹⁰² OPTATUS, *De Schismate*, I.17, 18; AUGUSTINE, *Ennarationes in Psalmos*, 36.20.

of Felix of Apthunga as well as direct involvement with appointing and interacting with episcopal arbitrators concerning complaints by the *seniores* against the bishop of Nova Germanica.¹⁰³

Regardless of the exact historicity of this endemic North African ecclesial vestige, the case can and should be made that these Christianized village-chieftains participated in living out Donatist political theology in a unique way precisely by realizing the Donatist eschatological ecclesiology where distinctions between laity and clergy disappear since the final days were at hand.

The second example of Donatist eschatological collegiality is that of the North African bishops.¹⁰⁴ From the inception of Latin Christianity in the second and third centuries, bishops played a predominate, yet collegial, function in the life of the African church in conjunction with the *seniores laici*. We know that in this period of history presbyters held a much less important role in ecclesial leadership than the ubiquitous bishops found in every city and village.¹⁰⁵ Among the bishops themselves they “selected candidates for episcopal ordination, made provincial policy, and took care of disputes between priests and other clergy.”¹⁰⁶ Additionally, North African bishops shared governance jointly within their provinces (broken down into Proconsularia, Numidia, Byzacena, Tripolitania, Mauretania),¹⁰⁷ the primate of which was based on seniority rather than a hierarchical see-city (with the historically rich example of Carthage as an exception).¹⁰⁸ This collegiality extended between provinces too which allowed for the attainment of common policies and to concentrate on joint areas of interest.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰³ *Breviarium Hipponense*, can. 100.

¹⁰⁴ M. TILLEY, “North Africa,” in *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, vol. I, *Origins to Constantine*, ed. M. MITCHELL and F. YOUNG (Cambridge, 2006): 380-396.

¹⁰⁵ Examples of the superior placement of bishops over presbyters, see M. TILLEY, “The Collapse of a Collegial Church: North African Christianity on the Eve of Islam,” *Theological Studies* 62:1 (March, 2001), 6. The term *sacerdos* was reserved for bishops alone (VICTOR OF TUNNENNA, 466 in *Victoris episcopi Tonnennensis Chronica* (444-567) in *Mon. Germ. Hist.*, AA 11/1.187 [Berlin, 1844]); priests rarely exercised independent thinking and governance (CYPRIAN, *Ep.* 66.8.3).

Regarding the omnipresence of bishops in North Africa, see A. von HARNACK, *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries*. 2 vols, trans. J. MOFFATT (New York, 1908), 1.281-86; D. HUNT, “The Church as a Public Institution,” in *The Cambridge Ancient History, Volume XIII. The Late Empire, A.D. 337-425*, ed. A. CAMERON and P. GARNSEY (Cambridge, 1998): 242.

¹⁰⁶ TILLEY, *Collapse*, 7.

¹⁰⁷ TILLEY, *Collapse*, 8.

¹⁰⁸ TILLEY, *Collapse*, 8.

¹⁰⁹ TILLEY, *Collapse*, 8. North African episcopal collegiality was to continue beyond the Council of Carthage in 411, albeit in a gradually weaker form. Tilley

The fact that such consensus existed in the late antique Church, even after the legalization of Christianity is impressive. But for the sake of this paper, what is important is the manner in which Donatist episcopal collegiality fit within the context of their eschatological ecclesiology. Though this example of collegiality has been studied before for the purposes of understanding the evolution of bishops in early church history, it is my opinion that the collegiality of North African bishops, along with the *seniores laici*, is best understood within the framework of the Donatist concept of an impending eschatology. The end of days was soon to come, God had given humanity the ark of salvation in preparation for the eschaton and the leaders and ministers of the ark, the Church, were to act as if the eschaton was already upon them. This is an example of bringing North African belief into their real world and everyday life, hence creating a political theology.

At the same time it is interesting to note how strongly the Donatist sense of collegiality differed from the Catholics'. Beginning with the reign of Constantine,¹¹⁰ Catholic bishops experienced a progressive sharing in imperial authority and of being answerable on a spiritual as well as secular level.¹¹¹ This became such a burden by

indicates that the collapse of Christianity upon the advent of Islam was actually the result of a series of setbacks. These setbacks included the suppression efforts of the Vandals after their arrival in 429 (TILLEY, *Collapse*, 9-13), the restructuring of civil and ecclesiastical power in the 530s by the Byzantine Empire (TILLEY, *Collapse*, 13-17), and the long term efforts of the church and bishops of Rome to exert stronger influence and oversight over the affairs of the see of Carthage; AUGUSTINE, *Letter 20**, in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century. Letters 211-270, 1*-29* (Epistulae), II/4*, trans. R. TESKE, ed. B. RAMSEY (Hyde Park, NY, 2005); J.E. MERDINGER, *Rome and the African Church in the Time of Augustine* (New Haven, CT, 1997), chapters 8 (111-135) and 11 (183-199); TILLEY, *Collapse*, 17-22).

¹¹⁰ One example is from c.318 when it apparently became possible under Constantine for bishops to preside over court affairs when properly delegated, the evidence however is scant; *C.Th.* I.27.1.

¹¹¹ An abundance of recent scholarship offers insight into phenomenon, see: P. BROWN, *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity: Towards a Christian Empire* (Madison, 1992); J. MERDINGER, *Rome and the African Church in the Time of Augustine* (New Haven, 1997); C. RAPP, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity: The Nature of Christian Leadership in an Age of Transition* (Berkeley/L.A., 2005); R. ENO, "The Significance of the Lists of Roman Bishops in the Anti-Donatist Polemic", *Vigiliae Christianae* 47 (1993); E. LAMIRANDE, "Coercitio", *Augustinus-Lexikon* 1, ed. C. MAYER (Basel, 1999): 1038-1046; M. GAUMER-A. DUPONT, "Understanding Augustine's Changing Justification for State-sponsored Religious Coercion and its Context Within Donatist North Africa", *Augustinus* 55 (2009); F. RUSSELL, "Persuading the Donatists: Augustine's Coercion by Words", in *The Limits of Ancient Christianity: Essays on Late Antique Thought and Culture in Honor of R.A. Markus*, ed. W.E. KLINGSHIRN and M. VESSEY (Ann Arbor, MI, 1999): 129-130; M. LENSKY,

Augustine's time that he openly complained about spending an inordinate amount of energy on matters not pertaining to the Church.¹¹² But, in all fairness, the gradual assumption of secular duties by Western bishops did eliminate the reality of lay influence in acclaiming bishops in late antiquity in general. The examples of Martin of Tours, Hilary of Arles, and many others are well preserved.¹¹³

B. In defense of the Church in preparation for the Lord

One of the most concrete proofs for the existence of a Donatist political theology is the method used by North African Christians to bring about the radical reality of their faith into their villages and cities. One of the distinguishing characteristics of Donatist Christianity is the zeal and intensity with which these Christians displayed their faith in everyday life and in times of persecution. There was no doubt for the people of late antiquity that the Donatists truly believed their faith and were not bashful to express it. The most potent example of this phenomenon was the existence of the Circumcelliones.

1. Circumcelliones as harbingers of Donatist eschatological ecclesiology and as defenders of the ark of the salvation

Part of the complexity of demonstrating the manner in which the Circumcelliones were in fact part and parcel of the realization of Donatist political theology is found in the fact that the Numidian group has always been stigmatized as excessively fanatical barbarian "disruptors" hell-bent on eradicating any semblance of Roman "civilization."¹¹⁴ This is largely due to the efforts of late antique Catholic polemicists, most notably Augustine.¹¹⁵

"Evidence for the Audentia episcopalis in the New Letters of Augustine", in *Law, Society, and Authority in Lat Antiquity*, ed. R. MATHISEN (Oxford, 2001): 83-97.

¹¹² Evidence of this is found in AUGUSTINE, *Serm.* 287.11; refer also to POSSIDIUS, *Vita Aug.* 19, 24.

¹¹³ An extensive study of lay participation in episcopal elections and the process in general is found in: P. NORTON, *Episcopal Elections 250-600: Hierarchy and Popular Will in Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 2007).

¹¹⁴ Augustine condemns the Circumcelliones for being "disrupters of the existing, divinely ordained, social order" (*Ep.* 185.4.15); see W.H.C. FRIEND, "The Roman Empire in the Eyes of Western Schismatics during the Fourth Century A.D", *Extraits des Miscellanea Historiae Ecclesiasticae Stockholm 1960* (Louvain, 1961), 13.

¹¹⁵ AUGUSTINE, *Cont. Ep. Parm.* 1.12.19, "Ubi etiam circumcellionum menti facta est, si more suo vilenter obsisterent"; *Ep.* 185.25 (*De Correctione Donatistarum liber unus*), "Sed in quorum regionibus aliaquas violentias a clericis vel circumcellionibus verli populis eorum ecclesia catholica paterentur..." *Contra Gaudentium*

It is, however, my contention that denigrating the Circumcelliones as mere barbarians completely obscures the actual purpose of the group in the North African context. In short, the Circumcelliones can and should be considered within the entirety of the eschatological/ ecclesiological framework explored in these pages. If so, then it would be sensible that in a church where the coming of Christ and direct inspiration of the Scriptures to follow God's commands, such Christians could easily adopt a form of religious expression pre-dating the arrival of Christianity in Africa for the purposes of demonstrating in their daily lives and routines the nearness and will of God.

In the Donatist worldview, with its deeply eschatological sense of separation from the world, of *civitas Dei* (the Church) pitted against the *civitas Diaboli* (the world and false Christians),¹¹⁶ it is no surprise that the walls of the garden of salvation (Cant. 4:12) would require brave Christians willing for their defense against the citizens of the *civitas Diaboli* wishing to overtake it.¹¹⁷

Thamugadensen episcopum Donatarum, 1.32, "Les Circumcelliones faisaient irruption dans l'arène, et les jeunes gens les perçaient de leurs épieux ou de leurs petites lances"; *Cont. Parm.* 2.6.19, "Leur religion est avant tout le culte des martyrs, et leurs errances prennent la forme d'un pèlerinage à leurs tombes; ils sont fidèles à la pratique de la "laetitia" près de ces "memoriae", et leurs célébrations sont des bacchanales d'ivrognes, célébrées avec des bandes de femmes se disant "sanctimoniales" donatistes, avec les quelles ils vivent dans la débauche."

This polemical approach to the Circumcelliones continues even up to contemporary times, e.g., FRENCH, *DC*, the Circumcelliones are referred to as "terrorists" (172) and "religious fanatics" (173); F. VAN DER MEER, *Augustine the Bishop: The Life and Work of a Father of the Church*, trans. B. BATTERSHAW and G.R. LAMB (London, 1961), "The Donatists and the Circumcelliones known for their hotheaded violence" (79-128); C. LEPELLEY, "Circumcelliones", in *Augustinus-Lexikon* 1, ed. C. MAYER (Basel, 1999); C. LEPELLEY, "Les Circumcelliones étaient, au temps d'Augustine, l'aile extrême et violente de l'église donatiste" (930); C. LEPELLEY, "les circumcelliones comme des brigands et des fanatiques" (934); J. KELEHER, *Saint Augustine's Notion of Schism in the Donatist Controversy, Dissertationes ad Lauream* 34 (Mundelein, IL, 1961), the Circumcelliones as "terrorists" (24); J. O'DONNELL, *Augustine: A Biography* (New York, 2006), "Donatism, had it prevailed and become the Christianity of the middle ages, would have been far more like Islam" (359, footnote 365).

¹¹⁶ TYCONIUS, *Commentarius in Apocalypsin Ioannis*, trans. BEATUS OF LIBANA (Madrid, 1772), ed. H. FLORENZ (American Academy of Rome, 1939), 506, "Ecce duas civitates, unam Dei, unam diaboli...et in utrasque reges terrae ministrant." Quoted in FRENCH, *DC*, 204.

¹¹⁷ TYCONIUS, *In Apocalypsin* (Beatus, 316), "Diximus quator angelos bipartitos esse, et invicem mixtos, id est ecclesiam et regna mundi: cirabimus opportune commemorare mundi regna, vel maxime presens regnum, in medio esse ecclesia, per orbem in falsos fraters." Quoted in FRENCH, *DC*, 317.

The fact that violence accompanied the actions of the Circumcelliones is beyond a doubt. Many reasonable theories have been developed to explain the radical element of this manifestation of Donatism, particularly how the deep economic and social undercurrents of rural Numidians drove the movement.¹¹⁸ But what has been largely ignored and could indeed provide a deeper insight into the Circumcelliones are the largely religious motivations of the group.¹¹⁹

2. Circumcellion Origins and Spirituality

The Circumcelliones entered into Donatist literary history in 340 during the years of Donatus' greatest episcopal strength.¹²⁰ These Christians primarily originated in Numidia and Mauretania and as agrarian laborers, organized in protest against economic conditions set by the wealthier, Roman plantation owners.¹²¹ These Donatist Christians referred not to themselves as Circumcelliones as such, but rather as *agonistici* or *milites Christi*.¹²² The appellation 'Circumcellion' derived from the method of their living arrangements 'around the

¹¹⁸ A number of theories stand out, an example spread consists of the following: F. MARTROYE, "Une tentative de révolution sociale en Afrique. Donatistes et circoncellions" *RQH* 76 (1904): 353-416; 77 (1905): 5-53; F. MARTROYE, "Circoncillions" *DACL* 3/2 (1914): 1692-1710; H.-J. DIESNER, "Methodisches und Sachliches zum Circumcellionentum" *WZHalle* 8 (1959): 1009-1016; 9 (1960): 183-190; H.-J. DIESNER, "Die Periodisierung des Circumcellionentums" *WZHalle* 11 (1962): 1329-1338; C. LEPELLEY, "Les cités de l'Afrique romaine qu Bas-Empire 1" (Paris, 1979); M. OVERBECK, "Augustin und die Circumcellionen seiner Zeit" *Chiron* 3 (1973): 457-463.

¹¹⁹ M. GADDIS, *There Is No Crime for Those Who Have Christ: Religious Violence in the Christian Roman Empire* (Berkeley/L.A., 2005), 107 (footnote 14).

¹²⁰ Frend disagrees with the assertion of P. MONCEAUX in *Histoire Littéraire de l'Afrique Chrétienne Depuis les Origines Jusqu'à l'Invasion Arabe. Tome Quatrième: Le Donatisme* (Paris, 1921), IV.179, that the Circumcellion movement began in 316-317 and opts for the period closer to 340. See FREND, *DC*, 171 and S. LANCEL, *The Donatist Dispute*, trans. A. NEVILL (London, 2002), 196.

¹²¹ AUGUSTINE titled the early Circumcelliones as *agrestes* or farm workers; *Cont. Gaud.* I.28.32; POSSIDIUS, *Vita Augustini*, 10. The initial Circumcellion uprising was captured in writing by OPTATUS, "nulli licuit securum esse in possessionibus suis; debitorum chirographia amiserant vires, nullus creditor illo tempore exigendi habuit potestam", *De Schismate*, III.4.

¹²² AUGUSTINE, *Enerr. in Ps.* 132.6; W.H.C. FREND, *The Rise of Christianity* (London, 1984), 74; H. CHADWICK, "Orthodoxy and Heresy from the Death of Constantine to the Eve of the First Council of Ephesus," in *The Cambridge Ancient History, Volume XIII. The Late Empire, A.D. 337-425*, ed. A. CAMERON and P. GARNSEY (Cambridge, 1998), 585.

shrines' (Lat. *circum cellas*)¹²³ of the martyrs which also served as large granaries and farm hubs.¹²⁴ These shrines were the expressive *loci* of their faith where they venerated the tombs of saints and commemorated pilgrimages in their honor.¹²⁵

But what makes the Circumcellion movement most attractive as a case study for identifying a manifestation of Donatist political theology is its distinctive and overt spirituality by which they sought to implement God's kingdom, and in doing so came to implement Donatist doctrine in its extreme form."¹²⁶

The veneration of the martyrs and of martyrdom stood out as one of the most significant and controversial Circumcellion trademarks. In addition to living and worshiping at the shrines of martyrs,¹²⁷ Circumcelliones were reported to have actively prepared for martyrdom,¹²⁸ going so far as to create provocations with non-Donatist Christians so as to be murdered.¹²⁹ For this reason Augustine noted that they lived as robbers, died as Circumcelliones, and were honored as martyrs.¹³⁰

The emphasis on martyrdom and the cult of the martyr in Circumcellion theology goes to show more than just the polemicized aspects that Augustine spun in order to discredit them. For these *agrestes*, Donatism lent Berber-Punic descendents a means of coping with their status of subjugation at the hands of the landed Roman elite.¹³¹ The explicit, and implicit, eschatology of Donatism validated

¹²³ *Corpus Inscriptorum Latinarum, Africa*, VIII (Berlin, 1881), VIII.9585; AUGUSTINE, *Cont. Cresc.* IV.66.83; D. BENEDICT, *History of the Donatists, History of the Donatists With Notes*. The Dissent and Nonconformity Series 12 (Providence, 1875 (Reprinted by The Baptist Standard Bearer, Inc., Paris, AR), 151.

¹²⁴ AUGUSTINE, *Cont. Gaud.* I.28.32; MONCEAUX, *Hist. Litt.* IV.180.

¹²⁵ TYCONIUS, *In Apocalypsin*, 26, "Sed ut discimus, diversas terras circuire et sanctorum sepulchra pervidere quasi pro salute animae suae." Quoted in FRIEND, *DC*, 173.

¹²⁶ FRIEND, *DC*, 175. The Circumcellion agenda was so aggressive that its pundits sought to operate within its own governmental enclave; C.R. WHITTAKER and P. GARNSEY "Rural Life in the Later Roman Empire", in *The Cambridge Ancient History, Volume XIII. The Late Empire, A.D. 337-425*, ed. A. CAMERON and P. GARNSEY (Cambridge, 1998), 281.

¹²⁷ AUGUSTINE, *Cont. Cresc.* IV.66.83; *Cont. Gaud.* I.28.32.

¹²⁸ TYCONIUS, *In Apocalypsin*, 68, "Et isti [Circumcelliones] non vivunt acqualiter ut ceteri fratres, sed quasi amore martyrum semetipsos perimunt, ut violenter de hac vita discedentes et martyres nominentur."

¹²⁹ AUGUSTINE, *Ep.* 185.3.12; *De Haeresibus*, 69; *Cont. Ep. Parm.* I.10.16; *Cont. Gaud.* I.28.32; *Cont. Gaud.* 1.22.25, I.27.30, I.28.32.

¹³⁰ AUGUSTINE, *Ep.* 88.8, "Vivunt ut latrines, moriuntur ut circumcelliones, honorantur ut martyrs."

¹³¹ Circumcelliones attempted to upstage their Roman overlords by freeing compatriot slaves, cancelling debts owed to Romans, and by neutralizing Roman

and uplifted these rural Numidians with the rallying cry “*Deo laudes*”¹³² which gave them hope by means of this original liberation theology.

Circumcellion spirituality did not merely center on martyrdom. In fact, what is interesting about this North African movement is the survival of descriptions of their faith life in practice that attested to their deep level of understanding of the eminence of God’s kingdom. Perhaps the most preeminent sign of Circumcellion sophistication was the highly developed ordering of religious life on the basis of being a community of saints.¹³³ This community consisted of a type of North African or Donatist mendicant monk¹³⁴ and women religious known as *sanctimoniales*.¹³⁵ The religious were recognizable by distinctive habits,¹³⁶ use of utilitarian weaponry known as ‘Israel’s’ and the ubiquitous presence and use of martyr’s relics.¹³⁷ These early monastic forerunners had a primordial function in Circumcellion devotional practice. Evidence of this comes in a subliminal fashion through Augustine’s polemic whereby he described the group’s proclivity towards excessive drinking and dancing at the martyrs’ shrines.¹³⁸ These celebrations of liturgical dance are another example of how this

capabilities for collecting on debts and enforcement of Roman laws, a veritable social revolution; A. MARCONE, “Late Roman Social Relations” in *The Cambridge Ancient History, Volume XIII. The Late Empire, A.D. 337-425*, ed. A. CAMERON and P. GARNSSEY (Cambridge, 1998) 368.

¹³² AUGUSTINE, *Ep.* 108.5.14; FREND, *DC*, 174.

¹³³ The early Circumcellion leaders Fasir and Axido were alternately known as “the leaders of the saints”, “Fasir et Axido duces sanctorum.” See also LANCEL, “The Donatist Dispute”, 196; P. SCHAFF, “The Donatist Schism,” in *History of the Christian Church*, vol. III. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Christianity: From Constantine the Great to Gregory the Great, AD 311-600* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1910), 362.

¹³⁴ POSSIDIUS, *Vita Aug.* 10, “velent sub professione continentium ambulantes.” See also W.H.C. FREND, “Circumcelliones and Monks,” *Journal of Theological Studies* XX/2 (1969): 542-59.

¹³⁵ AUGUSTINE, *Ep.* 35.2; *Cont. Ep. Parm.* 11.3.6; *Cont. Gaud.* I.36.46.

¹³⁶ ISIDORE, *De Ecclesiasticis Officiis*, *CCSL*. CXIII, ed. CHRISTOPHER LAWSON (Turnhout, 1989), II.15, “*De Monachis*”, “Quitum genus [monachorum] est Circumcellionum, qui habitu monachorum usque quaque vagantur...”

¹³⁷ ISIDORE, *De Officiis ecclesiasticis*, II.15, “*De Monachis*”, “alii membra martyrum, si tamen martyrum venditant.” Frend stipulates that the term ‘Israel’ may have likely come from a Berber-Punic corruption of the phrase ‘Azal’ (strength of God); Frend, *DC*, 174.

¹³⁸ AUGUSTINE, *Sermo*, 311.5, “ubi jacet tam sancti martyris [of Cyprian] corpus, invaserat pestilential et petulencia saltatorum. Per totam noctam cantabantur nefaria”; *Ep.* 29.11; *Cont. Cresc.* IV.63.77, “Negas eas quas dixi tyrannicas vestrorum in fundis alienis dominations et bacchationes ebrietatum”; *Cont. Litt. Pet.* I.24.26; *Ep.* 199.11.3. See also BENEDICT, *History of the Donatists*, 145-149..

branch of Donatism brought about the recognition of the nearness of Christ's return in their context.

3. Summary Remarks about Circumcellion Theology

The case of the Circumcelliones provides an interesting opportunity to look further into Donatist eschatological ecclesiology. When analyzing this historically denigrated and easily stereotyped religious faction through the prism of the theological framework which motivated Donatists, it becomes clear that the pejorative appellations of the Circumcelliones as being 'extremists' and 'bandits' may not be warranted. The Circumcelliones stand as one more example of how Donatist Christians actualized their belief in the nearing eschaton and in an ecclesiology in preparation for the Last Judgment. Their often radical utilization of temporal means to attain their view of the kingdom of God in their time and place serves as a clear example of Donatist theology at work.

II. CONCLUDING REMARKS ON DONATIST POLITICAL THEOLOGY

This paper began with the daunting prospect of synthesizing the past one hundred years of academic exploration in the area of Donatist Christianity. In the process, progress made in the area of understanding Donatist social and political realities was analyzed through the lens of more recent research in deriving the church's theological orientations. The result of the process was the ability to enter into the realm of understanding the method with which Donatist Christians applied and evolved their theology as their everyday realities changed especially in dealing with the Roman Empire and Roman Catholics. At the heart of this present research was the attempt, first, to identify if there exists within Donatist history an analogous political theology whereby the acts of humans and of God took place or made present in the one public history.¹³⁹ This attempt also led us to examine if a coherent theological system existed whatsoever for the Donatists and if it was in anyway foundational for their thought and *modus vivendi*. In the end, this paper will consider if all these dynamics indeed amount to such a

¹³⁹ See O'DONOVAN, *The Desire of the Nations*, 2.

degree that the Donatist movement could have been considered as part of a revolution.¹⁴⁰

The first aspect of this research, on whether there existed a Donatist political theology whatsoever, brought us through an overview of the history of the North African church. Included in this overview were summaries of the contributions of so-called proto-Donatists such as Tertullian, Cyprian, and an entire genre of martyrdom stories and a continuously evolving biblical hermeneutic to cope with the changes that their church encountered. This period seemed to have produced the beginnings of a distinctive method among North African Christians with which to understand themselves as separated from the world in preparation for Christ's return (the eschaton).

In the next period, we reviewed the time of the origins of the Donatist Church between 305-311, the influence of Constantine and his successors. This section of Donatist history resulted in tracing a dynamic evolution in how the Donatists saw themselves and related to the world. From the beginning of the Donatist Church to the time of Primian and Augustine, the Donatists developed their theology according to the signs of the times. At first they assiduously clutched on to their identity as an *ecclesia martyrorum* starkly different and beyond the *traditores* and those who would easily reconcile with the state. With Constantine's arrival, the Donatists both attempted the first of a series of unsuccessful and out of character appeals to Rome in order to be validated as the authentic African church and also a hardening of their separation identity. After Constantine's death, the Donatists grew in number as they also compensated for such demographic change by emphasizing their separateness more than their exclusive identification with the hero-martyrs. In the late 340s Donatist leaders tried for a second time to appeal to Rome (*ad Romam*) to be officially recognized as the true church in Africa. This too resulted in negative consequences for their church.

In the following years Donatists made do by strengthening their identity as a persecuted *ecclesia martyrorum*, persecuted because of its separateness from the fallen world. With the revival of Donatism under Julian, the Donatist Church experienced another realignment of its political theology as they became far and away the majority church in Africa. In such a context, the Donatist leaders figured, an *ecclesia martyrorum* mentality would have been faulty and incapable of providing relevance in a changed world.

¹⁴⁰ See FRENCH, *DC*, 336.

Soon after, Parmenian and Tyconius strengthened the integrity of Donatist political theology by expanding their church's approach to the rest of the world in a context in which they were now the majority. These gains were reversed soon after their deaths by the actions of their successors, namely Gildo, Optatus of Tingad, and Primian. Contrary to the Donatist theological tenant of separation from the world, as evidenced by Scriptural typologies, they sought all too effectively to enhance Donatist temporal authority even to the point of militarizing their Circumcellion devotees. This was the third attempt by Donatists to use temporal means to cement their position as the dominant North African church, which resulted in a similar fashion. The newly minted Augustine, through the preceding works of Optatus of Milevis, led an emboldened Catholic offensive against the Donatists in this period which resulted in a fourth consecutive denouncement by the Roman Empire. By 411, at the tail-end of the Catholic attempt to suppress Donatism, the Donatist leadership reluctantly but nonetheless *did* come face to face with the Catholics and their Roman overseers. By attempting a fifth time to be validated by Rome, the Donatist Church was finally defeated, so to speak, by violating, yet again, their core political theology tenant of separateness from the world. Although the Council of 411 did come as a major structural defeat for the Donatist institutional church's temporal influence and prestige it was not defeated in the conventional sense (used to define the moment as a completely mortal blow to Donatism) since the Church quickly regained its theological bearings as the separated collecta of Israel.

In this sense then, Donatism was not defeated, but merely suffered as its political theology was maligned at several crucial junctures in time. In the end, the Donatist Church disappeared by the time of the arrival of the Arabs in the seventh century. But between 411 and the arrival of the Arabs, the Donatists pressed on in reduced form after they recalibrated their political theology again to correspond to their new reality as the collecta, pitted against the naked cruelty of the world.

But what still remains unclear after this research on Donatist political theology is the degree to which a rupture exists throughout the Donatist Controversy concerning the acceptance and utilization of North African Christian *traditio*. This fact becomes clearly evident in the works of Augustine and his use of Cyprian as an *auctoritas* in the later Pelagian Controversy while he diverged from Cypriano theology in his dealings with the Donatist Christians, the "heirs of African Christianity."¹⁴¹ This issues of whether or not Augustine can be said

¹⁴¹ M. TILLEY, "North Africa," 396.

to have engaged in theological innovation or *novitas*, i.e. a rupture with North African *traditio*, will have to be more thoroughly and systematically explored.

As an ending thought, this paper started with the premise that what made the Donatist movement special as well as prolific was that it was part of a revolution. As opposed to what occurred in the eastern, Greek-speaking Roman Empire,¹⁴² North Africans maintained a distinguished theological tradition that set them apart from the world as God's elect, the adopted collecta of Israel. At the same time, their Catholic counterparts were creating ever stronger bonds with the Roman Empire, resulting in such extreme changes such as using coercive techniques to demand conformity to the Catholic Church. In this sense then, one could certainly consider Donatist Christianity to have been revolutionary for it came at a time when ancient Christianity was at an end.¹⁴³ The Church that had developed at odds and with secular authority, *vis a vis* the Roman Empire, for hundreds of years was becoming a subsidiary of the temporal power (the Romans and then the Byzantines, etc). Donatism in its revolutionary character was nearly singular in its stark opposition to the intermingling of church and state. For this reason, Donatism, because of its singular (political) theology, can and should be considered revolutionary.

Matthew Alan Gaumer
DBOF Scholar, Research Assistant
Doctoral School for the Humanities
and Social Sciences
K.U. Leuven

¹⁴² FRENCH, "The Eyes of Western Schismatics," 9.

¹⁴³ See R.A. MARKUS, *The End of Ancient Christianity* (Cambridge, 1990), 16, 213-228.

