

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

NOVATIANISM

I

THE history of Novatianism is often treated as an appendage to the study of the life and teaching of Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage. The great bishop's letters, and his treatise on the *Unity of the Church*, are intimately concerned with the problems raised by the schism of Novatian, and the so-called Cyprianic theory of the episcopate is, in a sense, an outcome of the thoughts provoked by a movement which did not separate from the Church on the ground of doctrine, but of discipline. Modern discussions of Christian reunion involve some theory of the episcopate, and Cyprian's has long been popular in certain influential Anglican circles. Archbishop Bernard (in *Early History of the Church and Ministry*) has expounded it sufficiently well. Another, and a perennial problem, raised is that of the character of the Church on earth. Is the purity of the Church an ideal to be realized in everyday experience? We recognize that the details of the rise of Novatianism were unprepossessing, but the problem was, and is, a genuine one as long as the Church is thought of as visible; as long as we believe that what we see is the true body of Christ.

The Church situation in North Africa at the middle of the third century was rendered difficult by domestic problems which arose from the lapsing into paganism, through fear of persecution, of some Christians. The Decian persecution was severe both in Italy and Africa. Fabian, Bishop of Rome, was martyred, and both Cyprian of Carthage and Dionysius the Great of Alexandria retired into concealment (Eusebius, *H.E.*, vi. 40). The Roman presbyters in 250 (June) wrote to the Carthaginian clergy to exhort them to greater zeal since they had been left bishopless like themselves (Cyprian, Letter 8). Cyprian returned this letter with the suggestion that it was not quite genuine (Letter 9), as he evidently thought a rebuke was implied, since he had hidden, while Fabian had suffered. This suggests that in Rome a section of the clergy at least had an independent spirit, and a readiness to exercise authority if the bishop were not available. It is possible that Novatian had some say in this, for he was one of the Roman presbyters, though

we are told that he hid from persecution and disclaimed responsibility. It is to be remembered that most of the information available is from hostile sources.

At this time in Africa the problem of those who had lapsed into heathenism under the stress of the times had to be solved. The good offices of heathen magistrates had obtained for some of these certificates testifying either that they were not Christians, or else dispensing them from the necessity of sacrificing to the heathen gods. It happened then that these people sought the help of the Confessors, i.e. those who had remained faithful, and had suffered, for their restoration to the Church. The Confessors issued "letters of peace" purporting to restore them. Cyprian rightly protested that this was a matter for the bishops and clergy, but allowed that where there was danger of death the holder of a letter of peace might be restored to communion. The Roman clergy gave their approval, and in a letter, generally agreed to have been written by Novatian (Cyprian, Letter 30), August 250, expressed strong feelings on the subject. They say of the lapsed, "Let them knock at the doors, but by no means break them open. Let them come to the threshold of the Church, but by no means leap over it. Let them watch at the gates of the heavenly camp, but armed with modesty, whereby they may know that they have been deserters."

Cyprian's attitude was resented by five clergy who had long opposed him, led by one Novatus, who demanded the restoration of the holders of the letters of peace immediately (this was the party of Felicissimus). Their demand failed, and Novatus retired to Rome, becoming more rigorous than before. He made the friendship of Novatian, according to contemporaries, the basis for fresh attempts against the Church's method of dealing with the lapsed, and he and his disciple began now to protest against laxity.

II

We may pause here to narrate the little that is known about this African Novatus. Let it be remembered that all information about him, as about Novatian, is from writers who were in the opposite camp. Cyprian assures us that the African bishops regarded him as a dangerous man, and a lover of novelty, and even perfidious and heretical. "He wished to know all in order

to betray all. He flattered in order to deceive, and had firm friendship for no one. He was a torch of discord always ready to kindle sedition and war, a tempest which makes shipwreck of faith, and an enemy of repose, tranquillity and peace." Le Nain de Tillemont, whose *Mémoires pour servir a l'histoire Ecclesiastique des Six Premiers siècles*, tom. 3, is invaluable, as Gibbon found, on all matters connected with its subject, adds that Novatus had more than this viciousness; he had vanity, arrogance, avarice, and he tells the old story of whose truth we have no means of knowing, that Novatus robbed his pupils, stole from widows, chased his father from his house, and let him die in the street, and kicked his wife so brutally as to cause a miscarriage. Pacian, the Bishop of Barcelona at the close of the fourth century, had dealings with Novatianists, and in his third epistle (to Sympronian) calls Novatus a traitor and parricide. His writings, to which we will return, give an interesting statement of the settled case against the schism.

One will be pardoned for wondering how this man, if the strictures enumerated be true, could prevail upon a man like Novatian to accept his guidance and counsel. Novatian was a man of superior talents, character and position. Probably he was representative of a class of convert highly creditable to the Church. M. de Tillemont, whose Jansenism no doubt intensified his devotion to the saints of the earlier and better days of the Church, was all for Cyprian, and says as much as can be said against Novatian, but admits that we will not find in him crimes of the grossness of Novatus's—"we deplore many good qualities corrupted by ambition". He acknowledges his eloquence, and literary style, and those who have read his treatise on the Trinity will recognize the sound and balanced mind behind it. He had been a student of philosophy, "it was from this corrupted spring that he drew an inflexible rigour towards others instead of learning from the philosophy of the Lord the gentleness and peace He teaches". Thus it is inferred that he had been a Stoic philosopher; not a bad basis for a strict and Pauline view of spiritual things. "It is remarkable that the devil brought him into the Church, and took him out of it also." This terse explanation of a conversion is due to the fact that the philosopher when ill called in the Christian exorcists, and then received clinical baptism. Cornelius, the bishop elected as the successor of Fabius in Rome, and against whose episcopate that of Novatian

was a protest, says in a letter preserved in Eusebius (*H.E.*, vi. 43) that he did not receive the other things which it is necessary to receive according to the canon of the Church, even the being sealed by the bishop.

III

It was held by many in Rome that the manner of baptism received by Novatian excluded him from holy orders, and he was ordained by the special act of the bishop. The Pope, says de Tillemont, was "ébloui", i.e. dazzled, by the convert's exterior qualities, and thus armed him with the powers of the Church with which to fight the Church. Later it was said that in the persecution he deserted the Church for another philosophy, and refused to succour those in trouble. Were this true, it is wellnigh impossible to see how he could have commanded a following of many of the most influential in Rome. The same author describes him thus: "While in the Church he deplored the sins of others as if his own, he supported the failings of others, he strengthened by his discourses those troubled in faith. He condemned the heresy into which he fell by the letter he wrote on behalf of the Roman clergy to Cyprian." "Whence", asks Pacian, "came the rigour of the Novatianists?" He answers, "If Cornelius had not been preferred to Novatian, you (i.e. Sympronian) would be upholding the doctrine of that letter still." In connection with this aspect of the matter the notes appended to Cornelius's letter in McGiffert's edition of Eusebius's *History* ought to be studied, and also the Note on Novatian in the edition of the *History* by my deeply-respected teacher, Dr. H. J. Lawlor, who describes Cornelius's letter as envenomed. Dr. Lawlor suggests that opposition to the ordination of Novatian had its root in the jealousy of an illiterate clergy towards a scholarly man. He adds, "in spite of all that Cornelius says to the contrary we need not doubt that Novatian was made bishop against his will." Thus we can absolve him from the main charges brought against his character by Cornelius, Cyprian, and later by Pacian, and later still by de Tillemont who constantly explains all by pride and jealousy and ambition.

Cornelius was elected as successor to Fabian. This was a triumph for those who took the more indulgent view of the treatment of the lapsed. Circumstances indeed made this laxer

attitude inevitable, since in the Decian persecution very large numbers, compared with earlier periods, were involved. The stricter party, inspired probably by Novatus, determined to contest the election in the interests of the purity of the Church and the seriousness of too easy accommodation of grievous apostasy, and when Cornelius wrote to Cyprian announcing his election, another letter was written by Novatian condemning it. The next event was the consecration of Novatian as Bishop of Rome, and the only ground for this must have been the view of a section that lax views debarred a man like Cornelius from being a valid bishop. This is tantamount to a charge of heresy against Cornelius. Waterman (*The Post-Apostolic Age*) neatly sums up the situation thus: "Novatian became the Roman Puritan leader. He felt that discipline should be severe. Cyprian (the real opponent) had become lax, Novatian remained strict. Cyprian would bring his net to land so full that it would break. Novatian would have no breaking. He valued the net. He held that by laxity the Church leaders had become apostate. The faithful city had become a harlot. Is the Church a museum for preserving saints, or a hospital for souls? Novatian preferred the saints. It is bad for a Church to be governed by a Puritan party; it is equally bad to lose the Puritans."

In connection with the consecration of Novatian we again meet Novatus. He searched Italy to find bishops who would consecrate his protégé. He found three, said to be rustics. Cornelius says they were drunk when they did it. We need not view this as anything but falsehood, for the character of the man they consecrated is not consistent with such conduct. Of his consecrators we may use words Benson (*Cyprian*) uses of the man himself: "they were tempted into the noble, and alas, too fruitful error of arraying the visible church in attributes of the Church invisible." Benson also offers a reasonable explanation of the behaviour of Novatus. His question was, "in whose hands should be the settlement of the terms of Church Communion?" "He wished to resist the encroachments of episcopal influence. If he could overrule the election of Cornelius before it became generally accepted, and establish himself at the right hand of another bishop, he could mediate between the episcopal power and the placing of discipline in the hands of the second order (i.e. the presbyters). He thus tried to invest the first Puritan with the attributes of the first anti-pope." Neander

gives a similar account of the part played by Novatus when he says that "he was a man of restless and enterprising mind, who with a fierce spirit of ecclesiastical freedom, spurned the yoke of episcopal monarchy." The same writer suggests that it was the influence of Novatian that made Novatus abandon the lax views he had held in Carthage in favour of the strict ones he held in Rome.

IV

The schism was now launched, and the anti-pope (the term may be excused; papalism developed later) wrote to various bishops to tell of his election. The reason for the schism was, of course, much more vital than one man's jealousy of another. Jerome says it arose from the reception to communion of sinners by Cornelius, and Socrates also says the same. This was really the fundamental issue. Novatus was active in gathering supporters of the strict party, and a good many confessors joined him, though some at least at a later date returned to Cornelius. Cyprian in due course had news of the election of Cornelius, and the letter of Novatian announcing his own election. There was little doubt in his mind as to the legitimate pope, and he sent two men to Rome who reported favourably on Cornelius. The anti-pope sent an embassy to Cyprian to urge his case, and Cyprian's account of this is found in his 44th letter (to Cornelius). He says that Maximus a presbyter, Augendus a deacon, and two others had come to him from Novatian, but he would not hear them. They forced themselves upon Cyprian during worship and demanded publicity for their case. They canvassed for support, but Cyprian told them they must return to the Church, as once a bishop was duly elected another could not be appointed. He held that Cornelius was the genuine holder of the see.

A little later a council was held at Rome to deal with the question of the lapsed, and opportunity was taken to repudiate Novatianism. It was declared that the schism upheld cruel and inhuman views of the lapsed since it maintained that those who had abandoned the faith in the persecution could no longer hope for restoration; that God alone was the judge of their penitence, and that the Church could not accord them absolution. Benson points out that Novatian had advanced to the position that the exclusion of the lapsed should be lifelong. Neander

sums up the matter by saying that the controversy turned upon two points : (1) What are the principles of penitence ? (2) What constitutes the idea and essence of a true Church ? Novatian did not maintain that the Christian is a perfect saint, but assuming the distinction of *peccata venialia* and *peccata mortalia* he treated only of the latter. He spoke only of the Church's absolution. The Church had no right to grant absolution for sin to a person who by any mortal sin had scorned the pardon obtained for him by Christ. Care ought to be taken of the fallen, but nothing could be done for them beyond exhorting them to repent and commending them to the mercy of God. The forgiveness of those who had sacrificed to idols must be left to God who alone has power to forgive. He dealt only with such sins as were a denial of Christianity. Later he applied the principle to the whole class of mortal sins. His ascetic spirit here dominated him. Pacian expresses Novatian's doctrine thus, that the Church itself perishes when it receives sinners to communion.

On the second point Neander writes that Novatian held that purity and holiness being the essential marks of a true Church, every Church which readmits persons who have broken grossly their baptismal vows ceases to be a true Church. It was rightly urged against Novatian that individuals are responsible only for their own sins, and that it is the inner communion of the heart, rather than outward fellowship with sinners, that defiles ; and that it was but arrogance of human pride to pretend to exercise on earth the judicial separation which God has reserved for Himself. The parable of the wheat and the tares is the guiding one. In a sense both sides made the same error. The Novatianist claimed for the Church on earth the holiness of the Church invisible ; Cyprian and the majority made the true Church consist in the unity of the episcopate, and from that derived ideas of its holiness and authority. In Letter 69 Cyprian claims all for the Church, and even invalidates Novatianist baptism because it takes place outside the Church. He says that when his opponents express belief in remission of sins and eternal life by the Holy Church they lie, since they have no Church.

The later history of the schism follows the course one might expect. Novatianist bishops were appointed in various places, and for a time the regular bishops of Antioch (Fabius) and of

Arles (Marcian) sympathized with Novatian. In Rome Novatian introduced an oath to secure the continuance of his following. At the communion the recipient had to swear that he would never return to Cornelius. Writers of subsequent times agree in saying that the peculiar feature of the sect was refusal to give absolution for sin, holding that the Church had no power to do so. This is, we must agree, a strongly anti-sacerdotal testimony, and is evidence of an early protest against a doctrine which became in later centuries, as now, a distinct usurpation on the part of the Church of the prerogative of God. The Novatianist Church rejected the practice which later grew into the "sacrament of penance" with its attendant unscriptural implications.

V

As time went on efforts were made to heal the schism, and the Council of Nicaea directed that after the imposition of hands Novatianist clergy should keep their ecclesiastical rank, except in the case of a bishop who would become either a chorepiscopus, or officiate as a presbyter. This implies that the schism was extensive, and we know that Phrygia was full of Novatianism, with many churches and monasteries. Rome also had many churches. Eulogus, patriarch of Alexandria, wrote six books against the sect towards the end of the sixth century, but these are lost. M. de Tillemont says that the Novatianists were strong in Rome, Alexandria, Asia, Constantinople, Scythia, Africa, Phrygia, Paphlagonia, and we find Innocent I (Pope 402-17) sending to Victricius of Rouen rules for guidance as to the reception into the Church of converts. The Emperor Constantine had tried in vain to terminate the division; he could not do so, but he protected them in ownership of their churches and graveyards for a time. Later (331) he forbade them to assemble and banished their leaders. Again at the end of the fourth century (about the time of Pacian) Theodosius I. tried to unite them with the Church but failed. Even the persecution they endured in common with the rest of the orthodox at the hands of the Arians could not accomplish union.

Many Novatianist bishops were outstanding men. Sisinnus, the bishop at Constantinople who died in 407, was praised by the historians Socrates and Sozomen (both suspected of being Novatianists) for his eloquence and learning. He had a gracious

and appealing spirit, and Chrysostom, perhaps jealous of his oratory, wished the Emperor to silence him. The successor of Sisinnus was Chrysanthus, who had been governor of a province in Italy, and was the son of a bishop of the sect. He had held office in Britain, from which we may perhaps infer that the sect was known in that province, and had sought the prefecture of Constantinople. He was wise and prudent, and added many to the schism. As late as 600 the sect was still alive in Alexandria, though obscure, and there is reference to them in Asia in 672.

No doubt the gradual decline of strict views invaded the Novatianist Church and helped to extinguish it. The cessation also of the problem of the lapsed, with the disappearance of persecution, must have had its effect. The change of the Roman world due to the rise of new nations would contribute, too, to its extinction. Yet there is a continuing witness of the Cathari or Puritans down to the Reformation, and the links are not fanciful.

Has this "stern Puritan relic of the Decian persecution" (Benson) anything to teach the twentieth century? Let us first quote Gwatkin who, after speaking of the reckless tirades of an evil-minded partisan like Cornelius, says of Novatianism that "the ideal holiness it strove to realize in the visible Church has a charm for every age of stirring life. If it falls in with human pride, and is near akin to the spirit of persecution, it is also near akin to those final facts of Christian certainty which it goes far to undo by want of charity. It may be the weakness of the most prosaic natures, or it may do duty for the thing austere and high which quick and vivid natures need to give unity to the ever-changing phases of spiritual excitement. In the throes of a grim and desperate struggle with some overmastering power of evil, when Calvinism or asceticism is let loose from the depths of human nature, the spirit of Puritanism is never far off." It has something to teach us. First, the eternal value of a protest against sacerdotal and false sacramental ideas in the life of the Church, and the duty of resting upon the mercy of God in life and death without the sanctions of ecclesiastical authority, and secondly, how erroneous it is to attempt to seek the assembly of the saints on earth, how un-Christlike to lay hold on the principle of exclusion in spiritual things, how foolish to believe that the Christian witness is more effective in isolation than within the greater Church. We shall serve our

souls and our brethren best by being content to testify in the great congregation that it is the Church of Esau, while reminding it that its theme is the Church of Jacob. This metaphor of Karl Barth sounds the note silent in those distant days, reverberant in the Reformation, and increasingly demanded in these closing times.

N. D. EMERSON.

St. Mary's, Dublin.