

The Christian and Civil Government (17th)

(The study today continues in supplying some history of the dichotomy regarding the Christian assembly and civil government as addressed by the Protestants and Baptists.)

In our last study, we began a presentation from history of the dichotomy regarding the Christian assembly and civil government as addressed by the Protestants and the Baptists. It was shown that this diversity goes back at least to the days of Augustine and the Donatists. In reality, persecution among professing Christians began with the emperor Constantine when he professed the Catholic faith. However, the Catholics and Protestants throughout the history of Christianity repeatedly look to Augustine as one of their champions. While there are some things that Augustine believed and wrote that may be worth reading and studying, it is important to know that he was an advocate of using civil government to eradicate those who differed from him and to enforce his religious views on others. One such group of believers that Augustine sought to remove was the Donatists. In our previous podcast, we quoted from John Owen and Thomas Goodwin of their ill regards of the Donatists. Thomas Goodwin said of them, “I find the highest venom of their opinions to lie in this, and it is high enough ... they denied the church universal, they denied that the church was anywhere but in that part of Africa where they were.” Goodwin also stated, “I have examined diligently the writings of Austin” and further said, “if we may know men by the writings of their adversaries against them, for there is none of their own writings extant.” In other words, Goodwin’s opinion of the Donatists was derived solely from what Austin (Augustine) said against them. However, David Benedict, a renowned Baptist historian, after much study wrote the *History of the Donatists* in 1875 proving that they were “grossly misrepresented ... as given by Augustine” and spoke of “their influence in the support of evangelical principles.” To further illustrate Augustine’s position supporting the use of civil government to suppress those who differed with him and his followers and to show the “evangelical principles” of the Donatists from Benedict’s *History of the Donatists*.

Obviously, we are unable to supply a lot of details from Benedict’s history and there is no way we can do justice to the valuable information in it as we endeavor to provide concise, clear, and informative history in a short podcast. Equally, we will not supply proof supplied by Benedict to show the “evangelical principles” of the Donatists. Needless to say, I would highly recommend studying Benedict’s *History of the Donatists* for a more complete picture. Therefore, we will seek to limit our quotes to the subject matter at hand, which is the use of civil government in religious affairs. Hopefully, we will give a lucid picture without being too tedious.

We mentioned above that persecution among professed Christians actually began with Constantine. After supply details of persecution of the Donatists under Constantine, Benedict summarized with the following:

This was the first great temporal state ruler who embraced the Christian cause, and his bad example in dealing with the Donatists has been followed, and very often much surpassed, by countless numbers of professedly Christian rulers in all succeeding ages.

While such a statement is highly discreditable to christianity itself, that is still more so which places the clergy, in most cases, at the bottom of persecution. P. 13.

There were other Catholics involved in the controversies between the Donatists and the Catholics but we will essentially limit our historical information with that revolving around Augustine since he is most notable in history. During this time, the Theodosian Code published 438 AD, decreed a fine of ten pounds of gold against the ministers or preachers of all “heretics.” In the beginning of the controversy with the Catholics, the Donatists were not considered to be heretical, but Benedict said “Augustine appears to have

been the first who attempted to subject them to the penalties of the Theodosian code.” P. 39. On page 112, Benedict wrote, “But to the old warrior, Boniface, Augustine sent his largest treatise about punishing the Donatists, not so much for heresy, as he admitted to the count that they had nothing in common with the Arians, but for their impious dissension from the Catholic church.”

As previously stated, time does not permit to give massive quotes to show the “evangelical principles” of the Donatists. Benedict supplies that in his book with quotes from debates between the Donatists and Augustine and other Catholics. Our topic revolves around the use of civil government to persecute religions of differing beliefs as introduced by the Catholics with Augustine and later adopted by the reformers in the reformation. That the Catholics persecuted any and all who differed with them by torture of the most horrible inventions and even unto death during the inquisition is so documented by various histories that I do not think any documentation needs to be given for this. Many of the reformers too suffered greatly at the hands of the Catholics. We plan to say more about it later but at this time we will give some information to show that the reformers also used civil government to persecute the Anabaptists who were among the forefathers of the Baptists. It is true that the category of Anabaptists often includes any group that differed from the Catholics or Reformers; therefore, the orthodox Baptists did not claim any and all Anabaptists. In fact, the 1644 London Baptist Confession of Faith stated on the title page of the confession, “The CONFESSION OF FAITH Of those CHURCHES which are commonly (though falsly [*sic.*] called ANABAPTISTS.” Nevertheless, the forefathers of the Baptists were grouped together with all Anabaptists and spoken of by their enemies in a demeaning way. At this time we will show that the main heads of the reformation believed and practiced using civil government to persecute those who differed from them, including the Baptists.

It is too time consuming to document historically of the use of civil powers by religious institutions for every generation or age. There are abundant histories on both sides to show such persecutions by the Catholics during the times of the inquisition and the wars that were fought between the Catholics and Protestants during the reformation for the advancement of their particular religious beliefs. Equally, intermingled with times of the inquisition was the period of the Crusades which were for the purpose of advancing religion with the use of the sword. While it is not our purpose to denigrate or deny God using such men during the times of the reformation, we shall show the consequences of believing that civil government is to be used to be a “nursing father” to religion as witnessed in the lives of some of the leading men.

First, this was witnessed with Martin Luther. Sylvester Hassell stated in his *History of the Church of God*, p. 381 the following:

The gladness manifested by the genuine Baptists of that day, upon the ascension of Constantine to the throne, was therefore soon turned into sorrow, when they found he had become their enemy, and persecuted them as the heathen rulers had persecuted Christians before.

A similar scene appeared in after ages, when the voice of Martin Luther and his colleagues shook the thrones of popes and emperors, and proclaimed liberty of conscience to all mankind. The poor persecuted Baptists rallied to his support, and rejoiced to think that the day of their deliverance had come. But they soon went away sorrowful when they discovered that the anathemas of Luther were as violently hurled at them as those of Leo had been against him, and eventually both Catholics and Lutherans joined hands in persecuting Baptists.

In writing about a group which he deemed as heretical called the *Winckelpredigten*, Luther wrote that they “are in no case to be tolerated These are the thieves and murderers of whom Christ spoke in John 7 They must neither be tolerated nor listened to, even though they seek to teach the pure Gospel, yes, even if they are angelic and simon-pure Gabriels from heaven If he refuses this then let the magistrate consign the scamp into the hands of his proper master — whose name is *Meister Hans*. ‘Meister Hans’ is

a euphemism for the hangman!” *The Reformers and Their Stepchildren*, Leonard Verduin, pp. 184-185. Regarding another party which were considered to be heretical according to Luther, he said, “I, Martin Luther, have shed the blood of the rebellious peasants; for I commanded them to be killed. Their blood is indeed upon my head; but *I put it upon the Lord God*, by whose command I spoke.” From *A History of the Baptists* by John T. Christian, Volume 1, p.156. Christian referenced John Alzog’s *Universal Church History*, III, 221, 222. Dublin, 1888 edition where Alzog referenced Luther’s *Table Talk*, 276 from the Eisleben edition. Obviously, other quotes could be supplied to substantiate Luther’s belief that the magistrates or civil government has the authority to punish those who differed with him regarding the preaching of the gospel. It is interesting that Luther even questioned the salvation of Zwingli. In fact, he said, “I wish from my heart Zuinglius” [an older spelling of Zwingli] “could be saved, but I fear the contrary; for Christ has said, that those who deny him shall be damned.” *The Table Talk of Martin Luther* edited by Thomas S. Kepler, p. 331. I thought this rather strange since Luther was “persuaded that Ahab was saved” *Ibid*, P. 264.

However, our time is up for today. The Lord willing, we will continue in our next broadcast showing that other reformers shared Luther’s principles.