

Novatianists

by William Cathcart

William Cathcart's sermon on Novatianists explores their commitment to church purity and the conflicts they faced in early Christianity.

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 5:11, 2 Corinthians 6:17, Ephesians 5:11, 1 Timothy 3:2, 1 Peter 1:15

Topics: "Church Discipline", "Christian Purity"

Description

William Cathcart preaches about Novatian, the founder of the Novatians, who was a philosopher before his conversion and became a strong advocate for maintaining purity in the churches. Novatian resisted the forgiveness of apostates by the church, leading to his condemnation by Cornelius and the Roman bishops. The Novatians, also known as Kathari or Puritans, emphasized purity of church membership and excluded those who had committed deadly sins or sacrificed to idols. Despite persecution, the Novatians spread widely and influenced many Christians with their strong stance on discipline and consecration to God.

Transcript

Novatians, The.--Novatian, the distinguished founder of the community that bore his name, is known among Greek ecclesiastical writers as Novatus. He was not Novatus of Carthage, a presbyter of that city, who sorely vexed the imperious soul of Cyprian, and who came to Rome and united with Novatian in efforts to maintain gospel purity in the churches.

Novatian, before he professed conversion, was a philosopher of remarkable ability, culture, eloquence, and powers of persuasion; he was a natural leader of men. When attacked by a dangerous disease, from which death was apprehended, in accordance with the opinion then commonly held by Christians, it was judged that he should be baptized to make heaven certain, and, as his weakness rendered immersion impossible without risking his immediate death, he was subjected, on his couch, to a profuse application of water. We are not informed that Novatian desired this ceremony himself, without any persuasions from his alarmed friends. The writer was once sent for to see a dying lady, and, after praying with her, was earnestly pressed by a follower of Irish Romanism, the perverted faith of St. Patrick the Baptist, to regenerate her ;" he declined to exercise the powers of the Spirit of God and the functions of a Pedo-baptist minister; had he yielded, the lady was in a condition in which she could not beheld responsible for the act. And it is not improbable that this was the situation of Novatian. He was spared by the providence of God for a mighty work in the churches, and when restored to health he became very active in advancing

the interests of Christianity in Rome.

At that period the church, in the capital of the world, as Eusebius records, had 46 presbyters, 14 deacons and subdeacons, 50 minor ecclesiastical officials, and widows and sick and indigent persons, numbering in all 1500, whose support had to be provided for. And partly to assist in bearing this burden, but chiefly through a lack of faith and of complete consecration to God, the door of the church was kept very wide for the admission of unconverted professors, and when these persons betrayed the Saviour by sacrificing to idols in times of persecution, their conduct was excused by their lax brethren; and the excommunication, necessarily pronounced upon them immediately after their apostasy, was speedily removed.

Cornelius, a Roman presbyter, with an eager eye to the Support to be gathered from restored apostates, strongly advocated their forgiveness by the church. Novatian very strenuously resisted it; and when a successor to Bishop Fabianus was to be elected, Cornelius was properly made a predecessor of a long line of coming popes, who loved gold more than anything in the Christian religion.

Novatian was condemned by Cornelius and by all his episcopal friends; and the bishop of Rome sent letters everywhere, bringing the most grievous charges against him, and giving the names and positions of the bishops who united with him in his efforts to crush the first great reformer.

Novatian had been made a presbyter by Fabianus against the custom of the church, for, as Cornelius says, in Eusebius,* "It was not lawful that one baptized in his sick-bed by aspersion, as he was, should be promoted to any order of the clergy. If, indeed, it be proper to say that one like him did receive baptism." But this only shows his extraordinary talents and influence.

After Cornelius became bishop Novatian was elevated to the same office by three Italian bishops, and at once founded the purer community, for whose advancement he labored with great success until martyrdom removed him from the presence of wicked church members in full ecclesiastical standing.

Among the charges brought by Cornelius against Novatian, a list of which can be found in Eusebius, was an accusation of cowardice for refusing to perform the duties of his ministerial office in a time of persecution. Novatian set up a new community in defiance of Cornelius and of nearly all the Christian bishops on earth; and in this he showed unusual courage. Opposition to the treachery, charged upon himself by Cornelius, was the chief instrument which he used to establish his pure church, and it is not in human nature to believe that any man could found a new community in Rome itself by denunciations of a cowardly crime of which he himself had given a conspicuous example. Besides, he left the world as a martyr.

It was customary in the time of Ambrose, when the minister distributed the Lord's Supper to the faithful, to say, "The body of Christ," and the recipient answered, "Amen."+ Cornelius, in the same calumnious letter in Eusebius, states that Novatian, when he gave a portion of the Eucharist to a communicant, instead of permitting him to say "Amen," according to the usage no doubt then in existence, seized his hand in both of his hands, before he partook of the symbolic bread, and made him "swear by the body and blood of our Saviour, Jesus Christ, that he would never desert him, nor turn to Cornelius." This story carries its own refutation; the idea that the founder of the purest Christian community then in existence should resort to such an infamous procedure is simply incredible. Cornelius, in the same connection, makes slanderous statements about the extraordinary ambition of Novatian, which have come down to us through the "Ecclesiastical History" of Eusebius; and his vanity is frequently given as the motive that led to his assumption of the bishop's office, and to the reformation inaugurated by Novatian.

The Novatians called themselves Kathari, or Puritans. The corner-stone of the denomination was purity of church membership. Novatian charged Cornelius and his followers with dishonoring the church of God, and destroying its divine character by admitting apostates into its membership. He maintained that those who had sacrificed to the idols to save their lives should never be permitted to come to the Lord's table again. This theory became popular with the saintly heroes and heroines, who suffered terribly at the hands of Christ's persecuting enemies, but whose lives were spared. And all true Christians felt a strong leaning towards the holy religion advocated and exhibited by Novatian and his followers. Socrates,++ a candid and intelligent Greek historian, says, "Novatus (Novatian), a presbyter of the Romish Church, separated from it because Cornelius, the bishop, received into communion believers who had sacrificed (to idols) during the persecution which the emperor Decius had raised against the church. .

On being afterwards elevated to the episcopacy by such prelates as entertained similar sentiments, he wrote to all the churches, insisting that they should not admit to the sacred mysteries those who had sacrificed (to idols), but exhorting them to repentance, leave the pardon of their offense to God, who has the power to forgive all sin. . . . The exclusion of those who, after baptism, had committed any deadly sin from the mysteries appeared to some a cruel and merciless course; but others thought it just and necessary for the maintenance of discipline, and the promotion of greater devotedness of life. In the midst of the agitation of this important question letters arrived from Cornelius the bishop promising indulgence to delinquents after baptism.

- . . Those who had pleasure in sin, encouraged by the license thus granted them, took occasion from it to revel in every species of criminality." The Novatians permanently excluded from their community all who were guilty of deadly sins and second marriages, as well as those who sacrificed to idols to save their lives; and they regarded the church universal as having lost the character of a church of Christ by receiving such persons into her membership. As a result of this conviction they baptized again all who came from the old church to them. Their baptism was immersion, the "pouring around" of Novatian on his sick-bed is the only transaction of that kind in their history now known; and as their leader suffered so much from the unscriptural performance, his followers had little encouragement to imitate such an unfortunate example.

The general doctrines of the Novatians were in perfect harmony with those received by the church universal; they only differed from it on questions of discipline, and chiefly on the great subject of consecration to God.

It is creditable to the piety of the centuries during which the Novatians existed that great numbers of Christians adopted their sentiments and their fold; though hated, wickedly calumniated, and fiercely persecuted for a long time, they spread, and they found adherents not only in rural regions, but in great cities and in the palaces of the emperor. Speaking of the law of Constantine the Great by which heretics were forbidden to meet "in their own houses of prayer, in private houses, or in public places, but were compelled to enter into communion with the church universal," Sozomen says, "The Novatians alone, who had obtained good leaders, and who entertained the same opinions respecting the divinity as the Catholic Church, formed a large sect from the beginning, and were not decreased in point of numbers by this law. The emperor, I believe, related the rigor of the enactment in their favor... . . . Acesius, who was then the bishop of the Novatians in Constantinople, was much esteemed by the emperor on account of his virtuous life."*

Novatian himself was a man of fervent piety; and his life after his conversion was above reproach, unless when accusations came from a calumniator whose charges were incapable of proof. He was the author of works on "The Passover," "Circumcision," "The Sabbath," "High-Priests," "The Trinity," and on other subjects. He had many distinguished men among his disciples. His community spread very widely, and enjoyed special prosperity in Phrygia; but declined rapidly in the fifth century. The Novatians, as a people, were an honor to Christianity, and their teachings and example exercised a powerful restraint upon the growing corruptions of the old church.

The Novatians commenced their denominational life when the baptism of an unconscious babe was unknown outside of Africa; and there it had a limited, if not a doubtful, existence. Indeed, if a celebrated letter of Cyprian, about a council of bishops, said to have been held in Carthage half a dozen years after Novatian set up his banner of church purity, be a forgery, and the supposition is by no means an improbable one, unconscious infant baptism has no proof of its existence in the literature of the world. The infant rite, according to the letter of Cyprian just referred to, had Cyprian for its patron, and as he had shown the utmost hostility to Novatian, he and his followers would not be very eager to adopt a ceremony of which his letter, if genuine, shows that he was the special friend. These considerations, together with the holiness of life demanded by Novatian churches, have led many persons to regard them as Baptists. Of the truth of this opinion in the early history of this people there can be no doubt; and that the majority of their churches baptized only instructed persons to the end of their history is in the highest degree probable.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/william-cathcart/novatianists/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net