

## NORTH AFRICA SAGA: THE BEGINNING AND FALL OF DONATIST CHURCH IN CARTHAGE, NORTH AFRICA

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**Abstract:** Christianity in North Africa then was not of a recent happening nor was it a by-product of missionary enterprise of colonialism. The Church in North Africa had flourished for about five hundred years before Islam was born and even before the coming of the white missionaries into the continent of Africa. This study undertakes to examine the rise and fall of the Donatist Church in Carthage, North Africa. The study is to establish the beginning and the causes of the fall of the Church and how some key figures in the Catholic Church collaborated with the Roman government to destroy and bring the Church to its final extinction. Library method is used in this study where both primary and secondary sources are employed. These include: published books, magazines, journals, newspapers, government gazettes, reports of organizations, manuscripts, and dairies. The findings of the study amongst others include: lack of proper evangelism, heresies and internal rivalries, divisions, government monopoly of Church affairs and persecution. The implications of the study showed that the failure of the Church to use the language and culture of the people within which the Church is established led to unsuccessful outcome. Rivalry for positions in the Church, divisions, and this coupled with capture of North Africa by Vandals in 429 and finally by the Muslims in 698 led to the disappearance of both the Donatist as well as the Catholic Churches in Carthage, North Africa.

**Keywords:** Saga, Beginning, Fall, Donatist, Church, Carthage.

### Introduction

The rise and fall of Christianity in North Africa is a remarkable event in African Church History and in the history of the Church in the world. The light of the Gospel had shone in North Africa for a period of time, but was quenched eventually by invasion of North Africa first, by the Vandals in the fifth century and secondly by the Muslim Arab tribes from Arabia in the seventh century.

Christianity in North Africa was established by the apostles and not by the missionaries from Europe. This early Christianity in North Africa according to Falk (1999):

*Spread rapidly and won the allegiance of the overwhelming majority of the population, and contributed significantly to the ministry of Christian Church during the first five centuries. This Christianity produced able leaders, teachers, apologists, theologians and writers who witnessed to their faith with dynamism that eventually won the support of the Roman state, causing Christianity to become predominant religion of the Greco-Roman civilization. (p. 1).*

The Church, throughout the five centuries of its existence in North Africa, experienced disastrous calamities of its history. These trials and challenges include such things as heretical teachings, rigorous persecutions, and takeover of countries of North Africa in the seventh century. Christianity survived in Egypt and Ethiopia with much difficulty and became practically non-existent in Carthage.

The aim of this paper is to critically examine the rise and fall of Christianity in North Africa with reference to Donatist Church in particular. What could have been the reasons and causes that led to death of Church? What were the contributions of the Roman government and that of North African Church leaders at the time? Was Donatus planting an indigenous Christianity in Carthage? Responding to these questions would definitely lead the researcher establish the root causes and reasons that led to the demise of the Church in North Africa.

## The origin of the Church in North Africa

Talking about the origin of the Christian Church in North Africa, two significant facts of history should be remembered. First, it is to be noted that Christianity swept over North Africa in early centuries of the apostolic era. This early Christianity in North Africa lasted for about five centuries before the emergence of the European Missionary Christianity. Secondly after a millennium of difficulties and setbacks, it died but only to resurface again, flowering throughout Africa south of the Sahara in the nineteenth and twentieth century respectively. Missionaries from Europe and America were involved in planting of this seed of Christian faith which has survived and has flourished throughout Africa to the present day.

North Africa at the time of Christ was filled with many different nations which were at various levels of growth and development. These countries include: Egypt, Cyreniaca, Carthage, Numidia, Mauritania, Nubia, and Abyssinia. The earliest Christianity to North Africa came from two main routes: into Egypt from Palestine; and into Carthage from Rome. It is to be noted that North Africa played a prominent role in the early civilization of the then world. Falk (1997) observes that:

*The records of Narmes-menes indicate the existence of the Egyptian civilization at the time of Sumerians in Babylon and their contribution to the civilization of their day. From the second Millennium BC, Egypt had intimate ties Palestine and Syria. Throughout the centuries, Egypt has been in constant contact with the civilizations of the Middle East and Europe. (p. 25).*

## The importance of Egypt in Early Christianity

Egypt had been an important nation for more than two thousand years at the time of Christ. It was not an independent kingdom but part of the Roman Empire. The country was very important as a centre of learning. It had a very important school known as the "Catechetical School of Alexandria." The Israelites had lived in Egypt in the land of Goshen for nearly four centuries. Alexandria became an important centre of commerce and many Jews made it their home. They established Synagogues and introduced the worship of God and instruction of Torah to the people. The prominence of the Jewish faith in Egypt led to the translation in Alexandria of the Hebrew Version of the Old Testament into Greek Version, known as the Septuagint. This promoted the teaching of the Old Testament among the Greek-speaking people, including Africans and this prepared people for the coming of Christianity.

Some historians agreed that after the remarkable historical event of the Pentecost in Jerusalem and following the instruction from our Lord Jesus Christ to his disciples to go into all the world beginning from Jerusalem and the areas around, the next place for the gospel to go was no other than Africa. It is not clear when the gospel reached Egypt. Some scholars suggest that Apollos, the preacher whom we meet in Acts 18 and about whom Paul mentions in 1Corinthians1, was an Alexandrian Jew who probably might have brought the gospel into Egypt. This opinion could be proved academically since there is no indication or information as to when he became a disciple. A later report from Church tradition suggests that it was Mark the evangelist who first preached in Egypt and established the Church in Alexandria. Irvin and Sunquist (2001), both state that:

*While the tradition cannot be historically confirmed, the discovery in 1958 by Morton Smith of a long-lost letter believed to be from Clement of Alexandria from the end of the second century adds an interesting twist. According to Clement's letter, Mark originally wrote his gospel in Rome during Peter's residence there. After Peter was martyred, Mark came to Alexandria, where he composed a long version of his gospel, using information he had received from Peter. (p. 87).*

The tradition according to Falk "received support from Eusebius who accepted that John Mark was an active missionary in Egypt who established Churches in the city of Alexandria." Orthodox Church historian reports that after Paul and Barnabas had disagreement over John Mark at the beginning of their second missionary journey, Barnabas and Mark went to Cyprus to minister, after which Mark went to Pentapolis his birth place, to preach. From there Mark came to Egypt and began his ministry in Alexandria. His first convert was a cobbler who responded to the message and invited Mark to his house where he and his household were all baptized.

Egypt, like Carthage had three ethnic groups that played a dominant role in the propagation of the gospel. These ethnic groups were: the Jews, the Hellenists, and the Copts. The Christian Jews who lived in Jewish settlements in

Egypt from AD 50 – 100, constituted the link between the Church in Egypt and the apostles. The first historically known Christian from Alexandria was the Jew, Apollos, the famous preacher in Corinth, whose Hellenistic eloquence was a great challenge to apostle Paul. It is presumably believed that he was instructed in the way of the Lord in Alexandria (Acts 18:24; 1Corinthians 3:4-7).

In about 332 BC, Egypt was conquered by Alexander the Great and was exposed to intensive influence of Greek culture and hellenization. “Greek culture and language became not restricted to Greek traders but was practically accepted by the whole urban population. Alexandria itself became the metropolis of the entire Mediterranean East, a cultural centre even more important than Athens” (Aruma 2009). Alexandria remained Greek city and its top philosophical schools extended their influence even to Rome. It is to be noted that Christian theology in its true sense of the word started in Alexandria, Egypt.

The Copts were the non-hellenized population and the true indigenes of Egypt just like the Berbers in Carthage. During the period of persecution under Emperor Septimius Severus 202 AD, a great number of Egyptian Copts from Thebes, about five hundred miles south of Alexandria, were brought for execution. It is also to be noted here that under Emperor Decius in 249 AD, Coptic liturgical books were burned, a proof that a local Coptic liturgy had already been developed. In the same progression, around d 300 AD, the Bible was translated into Coptic dialect, the language Athanasius used in his preaching of the gospel around 330 AD. Egypt therefore must have been a Christian nation at the time of Athanasius’ Episcopate around 373 AD and beyond.

### The Church in Carthage and its importance

Africa as a continent has three major religions being practiced: the African traditional religion, typical for Africans, Christianity and Islam considered to be foreign to Africans. The Africans either follow traditional religion or otherwise they are Christians or Muslims. African traditional religions are varied and complex, but have common features – a belief in a supreme god, considered to be the creator of the universe like the “*Chukwu*” of the Igbo, “*Olowun*” of the Yoruba, all of Nigeria respectively, “*Nguletyo*” of the Kuku people of South Sudan, and the “*Nkulunkulu*” of the Zulu people of South Africa.

This Supreme Being according to Awolalu and Dopamu (1979):

*Is not directly accessible, but has to be reached through the spirits of the departed ancestors who being spirits, are believed to closer to the god or gods and intercede with them. These ancestors are venerated and receive regular offerings from their offspring. (p. 26).*

Religion has been profoundly influence by attachment to social groups of which ancestor worship is common. Departed ancestors being spirits, and regarded as lesser gods are revered as masters of the living and guardians of law and morals. Islam on the other hand as cited by Lapidus (1988):

*Is the religion of peoples who inhabit the middle regions of the planet from the Atlantic shores of Africa to the South Pacific, from the steppes of Siberia to the remote islands of South Asia: Berbers, West Africans, Sudanese, Swahili-speaking East Africans, Middle Eastern Arabs, Turks, Iranians, Turkish and Persians, peoples of central Asia, Afghans, Pakistanis, many millions of Indians and Chinese, most of the peoples of Malaysia and Indonesia, and minorities in the Philippines – about one and a quarter billion people adhere to Islam. (p. xviii)*

Muslims believe in the revealed word of God and to Prophet Muhammad through Angel Gabriel. The Qur’an is the direct revelation of God’s word and will, and is the ultimate source of Muslim belief and inspiration.

Having said this, North Africa first received the Christian gospel in the first century AD. The religion prepared and produced a good number of theologians, teachers, and apologists. Adiele (1999) observes that:

*North Africa was the mother of many prominent makers of Church history, (men like) Athanasius, Augustine, Tertullian, Cyril, among others contributed much to theological ideas to the making of the world-wide faith. The crop of dignitaries she produced is an eloquent testimony of the intellectual and Episcopal vitality of the Church. (p. 3).*

North Africa played a significant role in the early civilizations of the then world. From the Second Millennium BC, Egypt had intimate ties with Palestine and Syria. It was through this constant contact with the civilizations of the Middle East and Europe, and moreover the fluid borders of the time that allowed the movement of people freely, contributed to the establishment of Christianity in North Africa.

The two important cities in North that were concerned with the propagation of the gospel were Egypt, in north-east and Carthage in north-west. Egypt was mostly Greek-speaking while Carthage was Latin-speaking. Carthage was described as one of the most wealthy and powerful kingdom and most influential city of the Roman Province of Africa. Hildebrandt (1981) gives the description of the growth of the Church thus:

*The gospel also advanced in Cyreniaca and the Roman Province of the West... The Church continued to grow from AD 200 – 300. There were seventy bishops in the Church around AD 220. By AD 250, there were almost 150 bishops and by the end of the century – around AD 300, there were more than 250. (10).*

Judging from the figures above, one would conclude that the Church must have doubled or tripled its size during the third and fourth centuries respectively. The personalities that piloted the growth of the Church in Carthage at this time, included: Tertullian, Cyprian, and Augustine. This Augustine also known as Augustine of Hippo was the one who later suppressed the challenge of the Donatist organization (Church) and declared it as heretical movement and with the help of the Roman state, persecuted it.

According to Boer (1979), there were three ethnic groups in Carthage and this included:

*The Berbers, the original population who were poor peasants, the Phoenicians who were great traders and their Punic language became the lingua-franca of North Africa. Then the Romans, the occupiers who succeeded in destroying Carthage, settled, and colonized the country. These settlers were chiefly ex-service men coming from all over the Roman Empire. Many of them intermarried with Berber women, as did the father of Augustine. (p. 84).*

The Church in Carthage was Latinized and the use of indigenous Berber language was thrown away. This later became one of the factors that explained the failure of the Church in Carthage. The language of worship became Latin. Many critics believed that if the Bible had been translated into Berber language, it would have answered the problem of the Berber Christian evangelization. The Coptic Egyptian Church survived because the Bible had been translated into Coptic dialect, though Greek language was common. The Berbers would have been strengthened in their faith, most especially those in the rural areas. Many of the faithful were concentrated in the urban areas while the rural population remained unevangelised.

When Arianism rose in Egypt, Christians were busy fighting among themselves instead of preaching the gospel to the unreached. Church leaders and elders were interested in getting positions of power in the Church than in furthering evangelism. In this case, Carthage was not left out. Hildebrandt notes that:

*About the same time the Arian heresy grew in Egypt, there was a Church split in Carthage. There was a competition (for power) between two men for leadership of the Church in Carthage. Then the Church split into two groups: the Donatists, (following Donatus as their spiritual leader) and the Catholic Church. (p. 14).*

The Donatists were puritans in their ecclesiology and were opposed to adoration of martyrs and betrayers of faith in the face of persecution. Their own branch of the Church was an adaptation of Christianity to African thought and cosmology and that their Church was in fact, the National Church of North. But Augustine opposed, under-rated, and undermined this claim from the Donatists and presented them heretics and subjected them to persecution with the help of the Roman authority to force them join the Catholic Church.

Though the Donatists resisted the persecution, it did not stop until the time the Vandals invaded and conquered Rome and North Africa. The Church historian Baur (1994) observes that: “The hundred years of schism (*in Carthage*) were followed soon with a hundred years of barbarian oppression. While Augustine lay on his death bed, the marauding tribe of the Vandals stood at the gates of the city.” (p. 14).

The persecution of the Donatists by Augustine as heretics marked a terrible turning point for the disappearance of the Donatist Church but also of the Catholic Church as well. According to Falk (1997), “It was about AD 413, the

Donatist Church virtually disappeared. The Catholics however, profited little from this victory, for in 429, the Vandals holding Arian faith, crossed the straits of Gibraltar and began the conquest of North Africa.” (p. 48).

The Vandals seemed to have occupied North Africa for a period of about two-and-half centuries. They in turn were forced out by the invading Muslim Arab tribes from Arabia in the East. Boer (1994), notes that:

*In 697 AD Carthage fell to the Arabs, Repeated attacks had already devastated and depopulated the country. The Latinized upper class fled to Europe. The tribal organization of the pastoralist Berber, in the hinterland was preserved intact. The Arabs won the friendship of their chiefs who in turn accepted Islam as a seal of their new allegiance. The Berbers were akin to the Arabs and easily intermarried with them. Thus, what has been impossible under the Phoenicians and Romans has now become lasting reality; a homogenous, unified society – the Islamic Maghreb. (p. 29).*

### The eclipse of Indigenous Christianity in Carthage

The eclipse of indigenous Christianity in North Africa (Carthage) was as a result of contention between the Donatists and the Catholics. This contention led to schism. The schism marked the foundation of an African Indigenous Christianity by Donatus in AD 312. The Donatists wanted a Christianity that would fit into the framework and aspirations African genus and culture. This was one the major of the Donatists to establish a National African Church to address the faith and spiritual needs of African believers.

Their deepest cause was the idealistic longing in the Church for true holiness, especially of priests. It was through this stand for holiness of priests and believers in the Church that led to the schism and persecution of the Donatists. Beginning at the onset of the Church in the first century from AD 64 – 697, the Early Church in North Africa witnessed a period of suffering and death, more especially of the Donatists.

Donatus and his successors continued the struggle but to no avail, and this coupled with the invasion of North Africa by Vandals and later by the Muslims from Arabia, the Donatist Church including the Catholics were devastated, destroyed and eventually fizzled out in North Africa in the fifteenth century.

The Donatist Church would have been a typical African Indigenous Church if granted the opportunity and freedom to operate without hindrance. The search for indigenous Christianity in Africa did not with the Donatists. African scholars have been trying to develop and indigenous Christianity to African cosmology. In Nigeria for example, a similar controversy arose in the year 1890 in some Churches existing in Nigeria. The result of this was the establishment of “Native African Church”(NAC) free from foreign control in which the people would be able to worship God in all freedom of an African outlook, divorced from foreign dogma and with clear conscience.

Crampton (1975) on the issue of Native African Church notes that:

*The Church was established on 10<sup>th</sup> September, 1891 and incorporated the land ordinance of 1924... This is the first purely African Church to be established in Nigeria. It did not secede from any other organization but was founded on the purest principles of religious belief on African outlook, and it follows everything laid down in the Holy Bible for its rules and guides. (p. 334).*

On the other hand Madu (2003), on the quest for African indigenous Christianity says that:

*African Church men and women discovered some tenets of of the missionary teaching ran contrary to their cherished ideals, values and aspirations as embedded in African cosmology... and this ... triggered off the quest for African indigenous Christianity that would cater for their ideals, hopes, and aspirations in their own land. (p. 12).*

Turaki (1999) on his part notes that:

*The need to indigenize Christianity became a rallying cry of some African theologians and scholars... Their primary concern and objective was to strip and rid Christianity in Africa of all its western striplings and coverings and replace that with what is African. (p. 17)*



So, from all the statements, it can be seen that the question of indigenization of Christianity has been in the minds of many African scholars especially when they discovered and realized that the missionaries had condemned some of African practices in the Church as paganism. For example, in some parts of Africa the missionaries have not found anything in traditional religions which, when purified of its pagan elements, could be used in the Churches. Many African cultures had offerings to the spirits after the harvest had been gathered in. Strangely enough the Protestant missionaries have done little to encourage the practice of having harvest festivals in such groups to be carried out in the Church. Harvest festivals are very rich and important features of Church life in our society today. The offerings collected, both money and material items form the largest part of the Churches' income for the year.

Another thing the missionaries had condemned was the use of drums in the Church, but in recent years the drums once used traditional dances have now been christened and used in the Church and are accepted in the same way as the musical instruments like the organ, guitar, trumpets and so on are accepted and are used in the Church. It has been stripped of its pagan associations with paganism and they wear a new look and use in the Church today. Therefore, the indigenous African Church started and established by Donatus and his associates in Carthage would have remained as the true indigenous African Church reflecting the tenets of African culture and cosmology. The Berber traders to West Africa would have brought this African Christianity to fellow Africans in West Africa. But this Church was brought to an end by certain key figures, both in the Catholic Church and Roman state. Prominent to the collapse and death of the Donatist Church in Carthage were Emperor Constantine and Augustine. Augustine declared the Donatists as heretics, while Constantine and his associates lifted the imperial sword against Donatist Christians, killing and banishing some others. In the annals of African and world history, when stories are being told about Christianity in Africa, the North Africa saga of a dead Church becomes a reminder to Africans and the world at large that hatred, divisions in the Church, and persecutions will eventually lead to collapse and failure of mission, vision, and mandate from our Lord Jesus Christ to bring people into the Kingdom of God.

### **The Controversy: Its causes and schism**

During the time of persecution under Emperor Diocletian (AD 303 – 305), all Christians were required by law and without exception to worship and offer sacrifices to the Emperor and the gods of the empire. Persecution was carried out for those who did not obey the imperial order. North Africa as part of the Roman Empire, persecution was rigorously applied and many Christians sacrificed to the gods of the empire or purchased certificates to show they had complied.

At the time when peace was restored to the Church under Emperor Constantine and the Christian faith recognized by the edict of Milan in 313, the Church in Carthage more than ever had to deal with the problem of restoring to fellowship those who denied their faith during the persecution. People had different opinions. Some Christians felt that they should be readmitted upon confession of repentance, whereas others thought they should be re-baptized. The situation became more complex and complicated because some Church leaders had purchased security from persecution while lay Christians had remained faithful and suffered martyrdom. Equally some Church leaders had gone so far as to turn Christians over to Roman authorities - Christian betraying Christian. On the other hand, some religious leaders had handed over sacred religious books to Roman authorities to be publicly burned. These leaders were designated as "traitors". These traitors had returned to positions of authority under Emperor Constantine. The faithful Christians, the Donatists refused or rejected to receive the sacrament from their hands neither did they wish to acknowledge the ordination of another person by such a clergy. All the above formed the bases and causes of the controversy and schism. But who were the Donatists?

The Donatists were the followers of Donatus, their leader. They were indigenous Berber people, original natives of North Africa. They composed the native Church of Carthage – North Africa. Before the Muslim conquest of the seventh century, Berber language was spoken over the whole of North Africa from Egypt to Atlantic coast. Most Berbers were agriculturists, gardeners, and some led a nomadic life. They usually live in small democratic villages and communities. Each village or community was directing its own affairs through its council, with some purposes chiefly for war. The communities were organized into tribes, and the tribes into confederations. It was to this background that Donatus was able to inspire them and won their support to establish a national African Church.

When the question arose to readmit the traditors back into the fold, the rest of the Church was far more forgiving than the Donatists. The Donatists refused to accept the sacrament and spiritual authority of priests and bishops who had fallen away from faith during the persecution.

### The Schism

The schism in Carthaginian Church in North Africa arose out of a controversial consecration of Caecilian as bishop of Carthage in AD 311. Caecilian was consecrated by Bishop Felix who was accused of having surrendered copies of the Scriptures to the civil authorities to be burned during the persecution. The Donatists maintained that Felix was not qualified to serve as bishop, and therefore Caecilian's consecration was invalid.

Irvin and Sunquist (2001) maintain that:

*It had the tradition in North Africa for the bishops of Numidia to participate in the consecration of the senior bishop of Carthage, but Caecilian was consecrated without them being present. Furthermore, in the eyes of many, he had a questionable past. Seven years before, during Great persecution, when he was still a deacon, Caecilian had prevented members of the family of a group of imprisoned Christians from bringing food to their relatives. Roman jails did not include meals, so without outside source for meals prisoners would starve to death. (p. 168).*

The testimonies above clearly show that Caecilian has questionable character. His consecration was not in line with the tradition of the Church in North Africa. Caecilian seemed not to have compassion on fellow Christian prisoners whose lives were in danger from Roman authorities and from starvation. As result of his actions, the bishop of Numidia took action. In a council of bishops of Numidia in AD 312, Caecilian was condemned on ground of his actions. His ordination was declared invalid and to this effect, they elected Majorinus to the office of senior bishop of Carthage instead. Majorinus was thereafter succeeded by Donatus, a popular presbyter whose name came to be associated with the movement he led. There were now two senior bishops and Churches in Carthage and members were called upon to identify themselves with one or the other and before long, all of Roman North Africa was embroiled in conflict. Many towns were divided between Donatists and Catholics. Constantine the Emperor became involved in the dispute. He wanted the Church to be a vital unifying factor in the empire. He viewed disharmony and schism in the Church with much disfavor and used his influence to bring about unity wherever possible. He convened a council in AD 314 at Arles in Gaul; the issue was debated and the decision of the council went against the Donatists. The Donatists refused to accept the decision of the council, their distaste for bishops who had collaborated with Rome came out of their broader view of the Roman Empire. For them the holiness of the Church was at stake, for the Holy Spirit could not be passed through the ministry of those who had committed sin of betraying Jesus Christ.

The conflict between the two parties in Carthage broke into open separation early in the fourth century. Two different Churches emerged, Catholic and Donatist. Over the cause of several centuries they lived side-by-side. Sometimes they fought in open riots against one another and at times accepted another's presence to the point of limited mutual accommodation. The conflict between them was never resolved.

### Emperor Constantine and the Donatist Church

In AD 313, six months after the Emperor had legalized Christianity, the Donatists brought their case against Caecilian before Constantine for judgment. Constantine handed the matter to Miltiades, bishop of Rome, for decision. Miltiades convened a meeting of local bishops and the council of bishops decided in favour of Caecilian. The Donatists objected the decision of the council as they claimed that one of the bishops who ordained Miltiades, the bishop of Rome was suspected of being a traditor and thus Miltiades himself was suspected either. A second council with a large number of participants was convened by the Emperor a year later at Arles in Gaul. Once again the decision was in favour of Caecilian and the Churches that were in communion with him were granted official recognition and were given political benefits and substantial financial support from the imperial treasury. The Donatists on the other hand were allowed to operate their Churches and continue to ordain bishops and presbyters outside imperial sanction. The de facto compromise was in part as a result of the popular support the Donatist party had throughout North Africa. Yet the Emperor refused to acknowledge and recognize the validity of their case.

Constantine's primary concern throughout the course of these events was for the unity of religion that he hoped would bind the subjects of his empire together. This, plus the political need for maintaining peace in the region, led him directly into the ecclesiastical fray. The unity and peace of the Church was also a concern for the majority of the bishops throughout the Mediterranean world. In the past bishops had carried out deliberations and settled disputes through local and regional conciliar meetings. In these meetings, resolutions and recommendations were passed. Irvin and Sunquist note that: 'One of the recommendations passed was that the only means bishops had to enforce Church discipline or maintain Church teaching prior to AD 315 was excommunication.' (p.169).to this traditional instrument, Constantine added a new one; imperial edicts backed by troops. In AD 317 Constantine ordered the Donatists to be suppressed for disturbing the peace. Troops were sent to deal with the Donatists in Carthage, their properties were confiscated and their leaders arrested and sent into exile. It was a decisive moment: for the first time in the history of the Christian movement, a Christian government used violent force to try to quell a dissenting Christian party, but to this, the Donatists were determined to forge ahead with their determination as Leitzmann (1950) observes:

*Several of confiscations, harassments, and violence ensued, to little avail. Facing the entrenched determination and growing number of Donatist believers, the Emperor abandoned his policy of use of force in AD 321. He inaugurated in AD 322 a period of tolerance that lasted until AD 347. An uneasy state of co-existence between the two sides set in. neither party gave up its polemic against the other. Donatists were judged schismatic for breaking the unity of the Church, while Catholics were regarded as practicing invalid sacraments because of the presence of traitors in their Episcopal successions. For a time both sides adjusted to living next door to a hostile Christian neighbours. (p. 92).*

Constantine now saw himself as a ruler of both the Church and the empire. His quest for power was reflected in his craziness for pomp and splendour. He began to wear a diadem, his imperial robes were adorned with pearls and jewelry and he carried the ceremonial regalia. His thoughts of aggrandizement led to the founding of the new capital for the empire. In AD 324, tired of Rome, he began the creation of Constantinople, 'The the new city of Constantine.' It was completed in AD 330 and rivaled Rome for its glory and it survived until it fell to rule of Islam in AD 1453

Constantine did not live long enough to enjoy the pleasures of his new city. As he lay dying, he was at last baptized into Church membership and spent the remaining days and hours of his life arrayed in his baptismal robes. He died at the feast of Pentecost in the year AD 337 and was buried in Constantinople amidst universal grief, leaving the Church in a deplorable state in the hands of Constantius, his son.

If anything could be said about Constantine regarding the failure and fall of the Church in Carthage, was his negative attitude and his contribution in persecuting it. If he had granted the Donatists full recognition to operate independently without any molestation, he would have achieved the peace and the unity of the empire he anticipated. His refusal to recognize them as potential indigenous African Church made the situation to linger until the Church eventually vanished in Carthage.

### **Augustine and the Donatist Church**

In AD 362, Emperor Julian lifted the ban on the exiled Donatists and allowed them to occupy their Churches. The rivalry between the Donatists and the Catholics began again. The desire of the Donatists and the Catholics to outdo each other to gain the majority of the population caused them to intensify their activities and hatred for each other. At the time of Augustine, the Donatists had already out numbered members of the Catholic Church.

The decline of the Donatist Church started with the death of their leader Donatus. Donatus died in AD 355 and was succeeded by Parmenianus, who undertook the struggle against the Catholics with the help of Cercumcillians, who were sympathetic with the Donatists. In AD 363, the Kabyles revolted against the Roman government. The Donatists joined in the struggle, taking on the image of a national Church. The insurgents gained some territory, but jealousy and treason in their own ranks brought about their own defeat.

The Donatists survived the incident with relative strength and 310 bishops were present at the council at Bagai in AD 394. However, Primianus, the successor of Permenianus did not possess the gift to guide such a large movement and maintained its inspiration for sacrificial witness. The Donatists were approaching a period of decline.



When Augustine appeared, he did not seem to consider the fact that the Donatist branch of Church was an adaptation of Christianity to African thought and that the Donatist Church was in fact the National Church of North Africa. Augustine's victory over the Donatists came through presenting them as heretics. At the moment the Donatists had no able theologian capable enough to confront and defend their cause against Augustine. During the theological debate held at Carthage in AD 411 under the direction of the imperial commissioner, there were 286 Catholic bishops and 279 Donatist bishops present in attendance. The outcome of the conference was an order made by the state, ordering the Donatists to return or join the Catholic Church. An edict to that effect was pronounced to enforce the return. A violent suppression of the Donatists followed. The Catholic Church jointly with the state persecuted fellow Christians. This was a very sad period of history for the Church in Carthage. Churches were destroyed and the faithful put to death or dispersed. By AD 413, the Donatist Church had virtually disappeared. The Catholics however, profited little from this victory, for in AD 429, the Vandals from Germany entered North Africa from Spain and began the conquest of North Africa. Augustine himself died on August 28, 430. The Vandals over the course of next decade overran the entire region, taking Hippo in AD 431 and Carthage in 439. The Vandals, who were followers of Arian Christianity, established an independent kingdom that lasted for than a century before the Eastern Roman Emperor regained control of the region in AD 534. Under Vandal's rule, Donatists and Catholic Churches alike were destroyed. Members of clergy of both Churches were killed and some sent to exile to work at forced labour, and the ministry of both Churches was severely impaired.

### The entry of Islam into North Africa

By the time the Muslims captured Carthage in AD 698, there were many people in the region who were ready to accept the new rulers as liberators. Not only were these new Muslim rulers the enemy of Roman government in Constantinople, but the moral rigour of their Islamic faith resonated with many of the traditional values of the Donatists party. To the non-Christian tribes the rulers offered full equality and participation in government as the reward for conversion to Islam, the departure of many Catholic members of the upper classes as refugees across the Mediterranean further drained the region of its Christian membership. In Carthage, Christianity experienced a rapid decline under Islam, more severe perhaps than in any other place in the then world.

Within a century Christian Churches had all, but disappeared from this region where for nearly five hundred years flourished. Occasional references to bishops or Churches linger in Roman Christian literature as late as the eleventh century but for the most part Christianity had disappeared.

Therefore, the tragedy of divided Church and of the government's intervention, forcing the Donatists to conform to imperial order, can only be seen in the light of history. The Donatist Church might have played a greater and significant role in the establishment of Christianity in North Africa and beyond. Just as the Egyptian Coptic Church became a National Church, in the same vein, if the Donatists were given the freedom to fully exercise their faith, they equally would have become an established permanent National African Church and possibly would have survived the Islamic attacks and conquest of the seventh century.

### Reasons and causes for the fall of the Church in Carthage

The reasons and causes that led to the decline and fall of the Church in Carthage differ from that of Egypt though similarities could be drawn here and there. It was in AD 639 when North Africa was first invaded by the Muslims. By this time the Muslims had already defeated the Byzantines in Syria, Mesopotamia, and Persia. The Muslims therefore found it relatively easy to defeat the Byzantines in Egypt. This defeat was as a result of Copts dislike for the rulers from Constantinople. The seat of government at Constantinople had wanted the Copts remain united with the Eastern Church. The refusal of the Coptic Church to embrace Eastern Christianity resulted in their persecution by Justinian, the Emperor of the Byzantine Empire. Thus, when the Muslims arrived at Egypt, the Copts decided to welcome and received them. They regarded the Muslims as good people than their fellow Byzantine Christians. Adiele describes the situation thus:

*The Empire continued to persecute the Egyptians while the persecuted continued to resist the persecutor. This struggle continued up to the time the Arabian Arab Muslims attacked Egypt in AD 644. As a result of the prejudices against the empire, the Egyptian Coptic Church openly welcomed the Muslims rather than remained any longer under oppression from fellow Christians. This costly mistake on the part of both the empire and Egypt has remained one of the saddest tragic event in the*

*history of the Church. The surrender of such a vital ground marked the beginning of the end of Christianity in North Africa. (p.3)'*

With the capture of Egypt, the Muslims consolidated their position and moved westward to Cyreniaca and to other parts of North Africa. Hildebrandt has this to say:

*By AD 710, the Arabs had completed the conquest of North Africa. All the land from Egypt to Morocco and the Atlantic Ocean was under their control; and this brought about the decline of the Church in North Africa. (p. 28).*

In Egypt, the pressure to pay poll-tax seems to have influenced most weak Coptic Christians convert to Islam. If a Coptic Christian became a Muslim, he did not have to pay the poll-tax anymore. By AD 717, many Coptic Egyptian Christians became Muslims in order to avoid paying of taxes. The Church continued to dwindle in terms of people embracing Islam. By AD 1000, the Coptic Church was rather small compared to the number of Muslims in Egypt. Therefore, the reasons and the causes that led to the decline and fall of the Church in Egypt include:

- (i). Internal fights, jealousies and heresies. These had weakened the Church very much.
- (ii). Freedom from paying poll-tax was an effective temptation to weaken Church members to convert to Islam.
- (iii). If a man wanted to be a government official, it would be wise for him to become a Muslim.
- (iv). Christians were not allowed to marry Muslim women, while Muslims were encouraged and allowed to marry Christian women as to convert them to Islam.

In Carthage the situation was quite different from that of Egypt. What actually happened in Carthage that led to the extinction? Boer gives the following answers to the question.

- (a). The first thing for people to know is that many Berbers remained untouched by the gospel and therefore accepted Islam as an alternative.
- (b). Most of the Churches were concentrated at the coast and in the Urban areas and as a result, there was an obvious failure to evangelize the Berbers at the rural areas. Hence they accepted Islam without hesitation.
- (c). The Catholic Church never thought of moving the Good News towards the Sahara but only towards Rome, and the Donatists were caught up in sterile opposition against the Catholics in Carthage.
- (d). There was failure to indigenize the Church. The few number of Berbers in the Church seems to indicate to the leaders that, there was no need to use Berber language in the Church or because of their conservative manner; the leaders were convinced that the liturgy could only be celebrated in Latin and not in any "Barbarian" Language.
- (e). In any rate, no Scripture was ever written in Berber or Punic languages respectively.
- (f). The loss of leadership was another factor. When Carthage first fell into the hands of the Vandals, and lastly to the Muslims all the bishops, the priests, and the Monks left the country and fled to Europe. As they fled, there was nobody left neither from the Catholic Church nor Donatists to care and gather the scattered flock of God. The indigenous Berbers were left without leadership. **This** explains their quick response to embrace Islam as an alternative. This saga marked the end of both the Donatist and Catholic Churches in Carthage.

According to Adiele, the failure and the death of the Church in Carthage was because the Church:

*Was neither a witnessing type nor a united community of Christians, she virtually ceased to be a force to be reckoned with. It is against this background that an opportunity to spread Christianity south-wards across the Sahara to West Africa and perhaps to Nigeria in general and the eastern states in particular was shattered. (p. 4).*

On the other hand Fuller (1993), regretting the same tragedy observes that:

*What happened to North Africa was a tragedy for West Africa. The Berbers became Muslims and they were the ones who came as traders across the Sahara to West Africa and brought Islam with them. If they had been Christians, they would have brought Christianity in those early years instead. (p. 39).*

## Conclusion

As noted earlier, Christianity in North Africa flourished for the last five centuries, planted by the early apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is therefore to be noted that, lack of proper evangelism, heresies, internal rivalries, monopoly of state over Church affairs, failure of the state and the Catholic Church to recognize the Donatist Church, persecution and these coupled with the invasion of North Africa by Vandals and finally by the Muslims brought the Donatist Church in Carthage, North Africa to its final extinction. The true saga of North Africa Christianity has come to pass that the land once flourished with Christianity for five hundred years has become the land of a death Church that could only be practically remembered in the annals of African Church history.

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