

# AUGUSTINE, MISSIONARY TO HERETICS? AN APPRAISAL OF AUGUSTINE'S MISSIONAL ENGAGEMENT WITH THE DONATISTS

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## Introduction

Augustine is well remembered as a theologian, polemicist, and church leader, especially in his dealings with the Donatists. In this paper, my aim is to take an admittedly different approach and examine Augustine's Donatist interactions afresh in the light of Christian mission. That is, as Augustine regarded the schismatic group as a heretical mission field—distinguished not by cultural or geographical barriers but through ideology—he deemed that they were in need of conversion to the true church.

In order to accomplish this, I will propose a working definition of Christian mission that stems from the Scriptures, which reflects the activity of the church. Second, I will briefly discuss Augustine's heretical branding of the Donatists, which made them a focus of mission. Finally, I will build the case for Augustine's missional engagement with the Donatists—even that which included the involvement of the state—by exploring his interactions with them over three periods between 392 and 419. From this narrative, an argument will be made for Augustine's understanding of and approach to Christian mission.

## What is Christian mission?

Following the consensus of missiological thought in most traditions, I am persuaded that Christian mission flows from the mission of God (*missio Dei*) as God is the one who 'initiates and sustains mission.'<sup>1</sup> Hence, I define *mission* as all that the church does to promote the Kingdom of God, while *missions* is the specific work of the church and its *missionaries* to make disciples of all nations through evangelism, discipleship, beginning new churches, and related ministries.<sup>2</sup>

At what point did mission become mission in the history of the church? Is it not anachronistic to refer to mission in the early church? David Bosch is correct in asserting that 'in the Patristic period the Latin word *missio* was an expression employed in the doctrine of the Trinity, to denote the sending of the Son by the Father, and of the Holy Spirit by the Father and the Son.'<sup>3</sup> However, Dana Robert argues: 'The idea of "mission" is carried through the New Testament by 206 references to the term "sending." The main Greek verb "to send" is *apostollein*. Thus *apostles* were literally those sent to spread the "Good News" of Jesus' life and message.'<sup>4</sup> That is, mission has been central to the identity of the Christian movement since its inception—Christianity is a missionary faith. Two contemporary scholars, Christopher Wright and Richard Bauckham, have gone so far as to argue that the mission of God is the grand narrative of Scripture and that Scripture should be read with a hermeneutic of mission.<sup>5</sup>

Referring to the mission related vocabulary, Bosch adds:

For fifteen centuries the church used other terms to refer to what we subsequently call 'mission': phrases such as 'propagation of the faith,' 'preaching of the gospel,' 'apostolic proclamation,' 'promulgation of the gospel,' 'augmenting the faith,' 'expanding the church,' 'planting the church,' 'propagation of the reign of Christ,' and 'illuminating the nations.'<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A. Scott Moreau et al, *Introducing World Missions: A Biblical, Historical, and Practical Survey* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), p. 17.

<sup>2</sup> Moreau et al., *Introducing World Missions*, p. 17.

<sup>3</sup> David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), p. 228.

<sup>4</sup> Dana Robert, *Christian Mission: How Christianity Became a World Religion* (West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Bauckham, 'Mission as Hermeneutic for Scriptural Interpretation,' unpublished lectured accessed at <http://richardbauckham.co.uk/uploads/Accessible/Mission%20as%20Hermeneutic.pdf> (accessed February 26, 2012); also Christopher Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL, 2006), pp. 29-70.

<sup>6</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 228.

In short, though the early fourth-century Constantinian paradigm shift certainly brought confusion to an understanding of mission, it remained a central aspect of Christianity and we can certainly identify missionary motives and endeavors even when the term mission itself is not always used.

It should further added that mission seems to have also been in the DNA of early African Christianity. Commenting on the growth of the church in the Roman Empire, mission historian Stephen Neill asserts that ‘it was . . . in the parts . . . today called Tunis and Algeria that the Gospel most rapidly took hold.’<sup>7</sup> Reporting on Gospel progress in Libya, Thomas Oden writes that ‘Jewish messianic believers from Cyrene in Africa, who already had a cosmopolitan, international and mercantile background, were among the first to grasp and implement the relevance of the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth for all humanity.’ Oden further argues that there was an evident missionary spirit among Libyan and African Christians.<sup>8</sup> The irony is that this expansion was largely fueled by lay and otherwise anonymous Christians—merchants, settlers, and even soldiers in the Roman army—leading Neill to conclude that ‘every Christian was a witness . . . nothing is more notable than the anonymity of these early missionaries.’<sup>9</sup>

### *Augustine's Heretical Branding of the Donatists*

How did Augustine regard the Donatists and why they were a focus of mission for him? While the Donatists have not been largely remembered as heretics, Augustine ultimately viewed them in this light.

At first glance, Augustine's appraisal of the movement is a bit ambiguous as he refers to them in some places as schismatics and not necessarily as heretics. He writes to the Donatist Cresconius that when ‘a schism is created; it is not to be called a heresy, for a heresy is a sect following differences, a schism the separation of those who followed the same things.’<sup>10</sup> Though schism was not as serious a charge as heresy, it was certainly taken seriously by Augustine as a force that disrupted peace and severed the bonds of love.<sup>11</sup>

That said, in his *De Haeresibus*, Augustine described a point in which the Donatists’ ‘stubborn dissent had grown strong [and] they turned their schism into heresy.’<sup>12</sup> How did they cross this line? First, he objected to their practice of re-baptizing catholics—a violation of his doctrines of salvation, baptism, and church. Second, their schism became heresy because they were bringing division to the Lord's church. Evans helpfully argues that it was ‘a breach of faith about the unity of the church; indeed, because of the centrality for Augustine of the doctrine that the church is the community of faith, it is arguably the worst heresy.’<sup>13</sup> Finally, Augustine considered them heretics because they were led by a heretic. In this case, he alleged that Donatus held to a less than orthodox view of the Trinity professing that ‘the Son was inferior to the Father and the Holy Spirit inferior to the Son.’ Augustine admitted that the average Donatist follower was probably not aware of Donatus’ views and did not necessarily share to them. However, he does make a valuable point: a heretical view is probably not believed in isolation from other problematic views.

In the preface to his work *De Haeresibus*, Augustine admitted to Quodvultdeus that it was a difficult task to define heresy. While the purpose of this book was to understand correctly heresies and to help catholic Christians know what they believed, Augustine's subsequent practice toward the Donatists reveals a desire to correct false teaching and to convert the Donatists to the catholic church. This missionary zeal and practice will now be the focus of our argument.<sup>14</sup>

### *Augustine's Missionary Practice*

Given Augustine's regard for the Donatists, let us examine his missionary practice, including the development of this thought, during the nearly thirty years that he interacted with them. To focus our discussion, we will analyze his

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<sup>7</sup> Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 34.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Oden, *Early Libyan Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2011), pp. 90-91.

<sup>9</sup> Neill, *History of Christian Missions*, p. 24; also François Decret, trans. Edward L. Smither, *Early Christianity in North Africa* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009), pp. 11-12.

<sup>10</sup> Augustine, *Ad Cresconium grammaticum partis Donati*, 2.3.4, cited in G.R. Evans, ‘Heresy, Schism,’ in Allan D. Fitzgerald, ed., *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), p. 424, hereafter *ATTA*.

<sup>11</sup> Evans, ‘Heresy, Schism,’ *ATTA*, p. 424.

<sup>12</sup> Augustine, *De Haeresibus*, 69.1. Unless otherwise noted, all English translations of Augustine's works are from John Rotelle, ed., *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1990- ), hereafter *WSA*.

<sup>13</sup> Evans, ‘Heresy, Schism,’ *ATTA*, p. 425; also Augustine, *Contra epistulam Parmeniani*, 3.6.29.

<sup>14</sup> Augustine, *De Haeresibus*, Preface.7; Epilogue.1-3.

practice in three periods: from the time of his consecration as a priest 391 to Honorius' edict of unity in 405; from 405 to the conference of Carthage of 411; and then after 411.

### *Augustine and the State*

It would be helpful to first offer a caveat on Augustine's view of the state and its implications for mission. Augustine's philosophy of history, articulated in his significant work *De Civitate Dei* (*The City of God*), was characterized by two allegiances—an earthly city and a heavenly one. The earthly city was concerned with temporary, material, and worldly matters while the heavenly city was concerned with eternal, spiritual, and heavenly issues.<sup>15</sup> Yet, according to Augustine, both realities were simultaneously present and interacting in a space-time, earthly context.

Augustine's political philosophy was also influenced by the notion of the two cities, as he believed that government and leaders, allowed to govern by the will of God, existed to serve the church or God's Kingdom on earth. Donald Burt writes: 'Augustine . . . believing that the authorities in the state were agents of God with the responsibility of promoting God's interests on earth and that those interests included the protection of the religious body that was the interest of his grace and revelation in time.'<sup>16</sup> While any secular leader should protect the interests of the church, Augustine believed that Christian emperors could especially be used of God to suppress heretical groups whose beliefs countered those of orthodox Christianity.<sup>17</sup> Peter Brown writes: 'Christian Roman emperors have an unquestioned right of *coercitio* [coercion/correction], in the strict legal sense, to punish, to restrain and repress, those impious cults over which God's providence had given them dominion.'<sup>18</sup> That is, these servants, according to Augustine were merely working to fulfill God's will and the aims of the heavenly city in the context of the earthly city.<sup>19</sup> Hence, for Augustine state involvement was not necessarily incompatible with the aims of Christian mission; though, the discussion that follows will reveal to what extent Augustine actually relied on the state to further the aims of mission.

### *391-405*

W.H.C. Frend writes that in the first ten years of Augustine's tenure as bishop 'he spent all his energies as a writer and a diplomat in combating [the Donatists], his object being first to defeat their leaders in argument and then, as a result of a general conference, to persuade the mass of the Donatist church to reunite with the catholics.'<sup>20</sup> Emilien Lamirande adds that in this period 'he emphasized mere pacific means of persuasion: personal contacts, writings, public discussions. Before 400, he is apparently an advocate of religious freedom.'<sup>21</sup> Indeed, prior to 405, Augustine related to the Donatists leaders and laity through a number of letters, books, and personal visits for the purpose of debate. Also, he played a significant role in some African church councils of catholic bishops in which the Donatist schism was the main issue.

*Letters.* Between 392 and 405, Augustine wrote twelve letters to Donatist leaders, groups of leaders, or Donatist laymen. Augustine's first letter to a Donatist bishop, *Epistula* 23 to Maximinus, was penned around 392 when he was still a presbyter in the church at Hippo. While investigating allegations that Maximinus had re-baptized some catholics entering the Donatist communion, Augustine rebuked him for such practices and took time to teach about the true nature of the church.<sup>22</sup>

Prior to 396, Augustine in *Epistula* 33 invited Proculeianus, the Donatist bishop of Hippo, to debate the issues related to the schism face-to-face or at least by letter.<sup>23</sup> In 396-397, Augustine wrote two letters to Eusebius (*Epistulae* 34 and 35) over concerns of the practice of re-baptism and appealed to Eusebius to help arrange a debate with Proculeianus. In *Epistula* 34, Augustine clearly communicates that he is against coercion as a means of converting the Donatists as he writes:

<sup>15</sup> Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, 14.28; 15.4, 16; 17.4.

<sup>16</sup> Donald Burt, *Friendship and Society: An Introduction to Augustine's Practical Philosophy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), p. 200.

<sup>17</sup> Augustine, *Epistula*, 185.26-28.

<sup>18</sup> Peter Brown, 'Saint Augustine's attitude to religious coercion,' *Journal of Roman Studies* 54 (1964), p. 110; also Augustine, *Contra epistulam Parmeniani*, 8.15.

<sup>19</sup> Brown, 'Saint Augustine's attitude,' p. 110.

<sup>20</sup> W.H.C. Frend, *The Donatist Church: A Movement of Protest in Roman North Africa* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), p. 228.

<sup>21</sup> Emilien Lamirande, *Church, State, and Toleration: An Intriguing Change of Mind in Augustine* (Villanova: Villanova University Press, 1975), p. 12.

<sup>22</sup> Augustine, *Epistula*, 23.2-4.

<sup>23</sup> Augustine, *Epistula*, 33.4.

God knows that this attitude of my mind is directed toward peace and that I am not trying to force anyone involuntarily into the catholic communion, but to reveal the plan of truth to all who are in error. Then, once our ministry has made it evident with God's help, the very truth may be enough to persuade them to embrace and follow her.<sup>24</sup>

In 396-397, Augustine wrote two letters (*Epistulae* 43 and 44) to a group of Donatist bishops in the region of Thuburiscum in Numidia. In *Epistula* 43, he rather persuasively challenges these leaders to consider the origins of the schism while also attacking the inconsistencies in the Donatist policy of re-baptism. *Epistula* 44 was essentially the notes of his debate with Fortunius of Thuburiscum in 395—one of the many examples in which Augustine documented his debates or conferences with theological opponents.<sup>25</sup> Though his debate with Fortunius was a chaotic affair, Augustine emphasized a desire to continue to dialogue with the Donatist leaders while disregarding the state's intervention against the Donatists.<sup>26</sup>

Around 398, Augustine wrote *Epistula* 49 to the bishop Honoratus. Augustine challenges the notion of a separate African church while teaching on the nature of a catholic church; that is, a universal church existing among all nations. He also invited Honoratus to debate via letter on these issues.<sup>27</sup> In *Epistula* 52, he writes to Severinus, a Donatist leader and his own cousin. Again, Augustine attacks the division of the church and re-baptism and pleads with Severinus to return to the catholic church.

Augustine penned two letters (*Epistulae* 51 and 66) to Crispinus, the Donatist bishop of Calama. In *Epistula* 51, written around 399, Augustine invited him to debate the issues at least by letter.<sup>28</sup> He goes on to argue against the logical inconsistencies of the Donatist position and chastises him for dividing the body of Christ through schism.<sup>29</sup> Augustine hints for the first time that if things did not change, he might be willing to accept the state's intervention.<sup>30</sup> Prior to 401, Augustine wrote *Epistula* 66 after Crispinus had forcefully re-baptized eighty rural farmers in Calama. Despite, Crispinus' aggressive action, Augustine invited him to debate the issues in a personal meeting.<sup>31</sup> Urging that people should be able to make their own decision about being Donatist or catholic, he writes: 'let them . . . hear both of us and let them do what they choose.'<sup>32</sup> Augustine warns Crispinus that if he does not cease with dividing the church, he would face the wrath of God, which may be an indication that Augustine was becoming open to the possibility of the state's intervention.<sup>33</sup>

Around 404, writing on behalf of the catholic church, Augustine penned *Epistula* 76 to the Donatists as a whole. Again, recounting the origin and history of the schism, Augustine goes on to relate his own understanding of the church. That is, the Lord would separate the wheat from the tares (the good and bad elements of the church) on the last day. Hence, it was not the job of the clergy to judge the hearts of men and bring division to the church.<sup>34</sup> Finally, Augustine reiterated his invitation for the Donatist leaders to join him in debate.<sup>35</sup>

Augustine's final letter to the Donatists prior to Honorius' edict of unity in 405 was *Epistula* 87 to Emeritus of Mauretania Caesarea. Augustine opens the letter by acknowledging his zeal to see the stubborn and resistant Emeritus converted to the true church.<sup>36</sup> Augustine accuses him of bringing division to the church,<sup>37</sup> of denying the existence of the church outside of Africa,<sup>38</sup> and warns him of God's judgment to come.<sup>39</sup> In this letter, he argues that the state has the right to punish a group like the Donatists because they are a disruption to society: 'For it is not without reason that they carry the sword; they are, after all, God's servants to carry out his wrath in punishing wrongdoers.'<sup>40</sup> Finally, through making reference to the origins of the Donatist schism, Augustine hoped that Emeritus would recognize his erroneous thinking and be converted to the church.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Augustine, *Epistula*, 34.1,

<sup>25</sup> Othmar Perler, *Les Voyages de Saint Augustin* (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1969), pp. 436-37.

<sup>26</sup> Augustine, *Epistula*, 44.11-14.

<sup>27</sup> Augustine, *Epistula*, 49.2-3.

<sup>28</sup> Augustine, *Epistula*, 51.1.

<sup>29</sup> Augustine, *Epistula*, 51.2-5.

<sup>30</sup> Augustine, *Epistula*, 51.3.

<sup>31</sup> Augustine, *Epistula*, 66.2; Burt, *Friendship and Society*, p. 214.

<sup>32</sup> Augustine, *Epistula*, 66.2.

<sup>33</sup> Augustine, *Epistula*, 66.2.

<sup>34</sup> Augustine, *Epistula*, 76.2.

<sup>35</sup> Augustine, *Epistula*, 76.4.

<sup>36</sup> Augustine, *Epistula*, 87.1.

<sup>37</sup> Augustine, *Epistula*, 87.1.

<sup>38</sup> Augustine, *Epistula*, 87.5.

<sup>39</sup> Augustine, *Epistula*, 87.4.

<sup>40</sup> Augustine, *Epistula*, 87.8.

<sup>41</sup> Augustine, *Epistula*, 87.10.

*Books.* Between 393 and 405, Augustine authored six surviving works of a polemical nature against the Donatists. While serving as a priest in the church of Hippo in 393, he wrote *Psalmus contra partem Donati*, which was composed in the form of a song in order to connect with the uneducated rural population. Actually, Augustine adopted this tactic from the Donatists who had used songs to propagate their message. In the book, Augustine appealed to the Donatists to cease being divisive and to return to the mother church.<sup>42</sup>

In 400, Augustine authored *Contra epistulam Parmeniani*, a reply to an old letter written by Parmenian, who had been the Donatist bishop of Carthage from 361-392. In his work, Augustine referred to the unwarranted origin of the schism while attacking the Donatists' inconsistent policy of re-baptism. Specifically, Augustine showed cases in which fallen Donatists were not required to be re-baptized when returning to the Donatist communion. Finally, Augustine strengthened his argument by citing the Donatist theologian Tyconius who believed in a universal church and Cyprian of Carthage who affirmed the unity of the church.<sup>43</sup> Later, in 400 or 401, Augustine followed up *Contra epistulam Parmeniani* with *De Baptismo* providing more teaching on the sacrament of baptism. Most notably, Augustine argued that the efficacy of baptism did not depend on the holiness of the baptizing priest as the Donatists had argued.<sup>44</sup>

In 401, Augustine addressed *Contra litteras Petiliani* to Petilianus, the Donatist bishop of Cirta in which he challenges the legitimacy of the Donatist movement by again referring to the origins of the schism.<sup>45</sup> Between 402 and 405, Augustine responded to a certain Donatist pamphlet with *Ad Catholicos fratres*, a treatise on the nature of the true church—one that is spread out over the whole world and not limited to Africa.<sup>46</sup> Finally around 405, Augustine wrote *Contra Cresconium* and again attacked the origins of the Donatist schism.<sup>47</sup>

*Personal Visits and Debates.* Despite the fact that Augustine despised traveling and that a journey on the North African roads could be dangerous, the bishop of Hippo also sought to convert the Donatists by personally visiting their leaders and holding public debates. In 395, Augustine made the two-day journey to Thuburiscu Numidarum to debate the Donatist bishop Fortunius. Yet, according to Augustine, neither the bishop nor the gathered crowd seemed interested in a serious exchange of ideas.<sup>48</sup> Later that year, Augustine pursued more discussions with Donatist leaders in Thiava.<sup>49</sup> Following his request in *Epistula* 51, he also managed to successfully debate Crispinus of Calama in 399.<sup>50</sup>

From Augustine's letters, we also know that he initiated debates with Proculeianus of Hippo (*Epistulae* 33-35) and Severinus (*Epistula* 52).<sup>51</sup> Yet, after a short period, the Donatists began to refuse any form of public debate with Augustine because of his superior communication skills. Being aware of their reluctance to debate yet still desiring to engage the Donatists, Augustine wrote to Eusebius: 'But if he [Proculeianus] perhaps thinks that he is not up to it, let him implore the help of any colleague he chooses.'<sup>52</sup>

*Church Councils.* From 393 to 427, Augustine participated regularly in the catholic councils of the African church and his voice was undoubtedly the most influential among the bishops. The councils generally addressed issues of church practice, discipline, as well as heretical influences on the church. Prior to 405, Augustine and the African bishops discussed the Donatist issue during three church councils.

Following the council of Carthage of 401, the bishops decided to launch a missionary effort toward the Donatists in the rural areas and Augustine himself traveled in order to fulfill the will of this council.<sup>53</sup> During the council of Carthage of 403, Augustine drafted a document on behalf of the bishops inviting the Donatists in each town to come to a public debate to resolve the schism.<sup>54</sup> At the same time, the bishops communicated to the Roman authorities their conviction that 'the heretics of the community of Donatus should be admonished in a "kindly manner," so that they could meditate upon their error, and not neglect to recognize it.'<sup>55</sup> As the initiatives of the council of 403 were unsuccessful, the majority of bishops meeting in Carthage in 404 were prepared to appeal to the state to force the Donatists into unity with the catholic church. Yet, Augustine and a small group of bishops

<sup>42</sup> Maureen Tilley, 'Psalmus contra partem Donati,' ATTA, p. 688

<sup>43</sup> Maureen Tilley, 'Epistulam Parmeniani, Contra,' ATTA, p. 312.

<sup>44</sup> Maureen Tilley, 'Baptismo, De,' ATTA, pp. 91-92.

<sup>45</sup> Maureen Tilley, 'Litteras Petiliani, Contra,' ATTA, pp. 504-505.

<sup>46</sup> Maureen Tilley, 'Catholicos fratres, Ad: or De unitate ecclesiae,' ATTA, pp. 150-51.

<sup>47</sup> Maureen Tilley, 'Cresconium, Contra,' ATTA, pp. 255-56.

<sup>48</sup> Augustine, *Epistula*, 44; Perler, *Les Voyages*, pp. 436-37.

<sup>49</sup> Augustine, *Epistula*, 43.2; Perler, *Les Voyages*, pp. 210-11, 436-37.

<sup>50</sup> Perler, *Les Voyages*, pp. 442-43.

<sup>51</sup> Frend, *Donatist Church*, p. 249.

<sup>52</sup> Augustine, *Epistula*, 34.5.

<sup>53</sup> Augustine, *Contra Cresconium*, 3.60, 66; Frend, *Donatist Church*, p. 252.

<sup>54</sup> Charles Hefele, *Histoire des Conciles* (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1908), 2.1.155

<sup>55</sup> Cited in Frend, *Donatist Church*, pp. 258-59.

prevailed upon their colleagues to ask simply for the state's protection against the violent elements of the Donatists.<sup>56</sup>

Hence, when the Emperor Honorius issued the edict of unity in 405, it was not at the request of Augustine nor the African bishops. Rather, it was a sudden reaction to the visit and personal appeal of Maximianus of Bagai, an ex-Donatist catholic bishop who had been violently beaten by the Donatists inside his church.

*Summary.* Prior to 405, Augustine actively endeavored to convert the Donatists to the catholic church. His letters were quite kind and respectful in their tone and generally included an invitation to meet personally. The main themes of both his letters and books in this period included: teaching on the true nature of the church, teaching on the proper theology and practice of baptism, a consideration of the origins of the Donatist-catholic schism, and an appeal for the Donatists to return to the true church.

Augustine's invitation by letter for a personal meeting was realized on several occasions during this period as he traveled to visit and debate a number of Donatist leaders. His influence in the African church councils also encouraged the African bishops to approach their Donatist counterparts in a friendly and persuasive manner. Augustine's only request of the state prior to 405 was that the catholic church be protected against the more violent elements of the Donatist party.

Though some of Augustine's letters allude to a possible acceptance of state intervention against the Donatists, his preference at this time was to see them converted through persuasion. While writing his *Retractationes* toward the end of his life, Augustine wrote: 'And truly, at that time, such coercion displeased me because I had not yet learned either how much evil their impunity would dare or to what extent the application of discipline could bring about their improvement.'<sup>57</sup>

#### 405-411

Though Augustine had urged the African bishops not to appeal to the state to intervene against the Donatists in 404, he did accept Honorius' edict of unity in 405 and respectfully worked to carry it out. Lamirande writes: '[Augustine] accepts together with the majority of the catholic bishops of North Africa the actual application of defensive measures against the Donatists and soon after, the direct use of force to compel them back to the unity of the church.'<sup>58</sup> Let us again analyze his thought in letters and books directed to the Donatists as well as his contact with Donatist leaders through personal visits and his involvement in the African church councils which culminated in the council of Carthage of 411.

*Letters.* From 405 to 411, Augustine continued to interact with the Donatists via correspondence by sending five letters. Around 406, Augustine sent *Epistula* 88 to Januarius, a senior ranking Donatist bishop. While not denying the state's intervention on behalf of the catholics following Honorius' edict, Augustine reminds Januarius that it was the Donatists who first asked for the state's help during the initial stages of the schism under Constantine.<sup>59</sup> Hence, once again, he reminds Januarius of the origins of the schism. While complaining about the ongoing violent tendencies of the Circumcellions,<sup>60</sup> Augustine argues that it was such violence that forced the catholics to seek the help of the Roman authorities:

You have, then, no reason to complain about us, and the gentleness of the catholic church, nonetheless, would have remained completely at peace, unruffled even by these decrees of the emperors, if your clerics and Circumcellions had not disturbed and destroyed our peace by their monstrous wickedness and mad acts of violence and forced that those decrees be recalled and put into effect against you.<sup>61</sup>

Augustine adds that the state's intervention had been the last resort after repeated, futile efforts to bring the Donatists together for a conference.<sup>62</sup> Yet, he continues to plead with Januarius to meet personally and resolve their issues before the secular authorities became more involved.<sup>63</sup> Even after accepting the state's role in dealing with the Donatists, Augustine still seems to favor persuasion as his preferred method of inviting the Donatists to reunite with

<sup>56</sup> Augustine, *Epistulae*, 93.5, 17; 185.7; Perler, *Les Voyages*, p. 251; Hefele, *Histoire des Conciles*, 2.1.156; Frend, *Donatist Church*, p. 262.

<sup>57</sup> Augustine, *Retractationes*, 2.31.5 cited in Lamirande, *Church, State, and Toleration*, p. 18.

<sup>58</sup> Lamirande, *Church, State, and Toleration*, p. 12.

<sup>59</sup> Augustine, *Epistula*, 88.5.

<sup>60</sup> Augustine, *Epistula*, 88.1-2.

<sup>61</sup> Augustine, *Epistula*, 88.6.

<sup>62</sup> Augustine, *Epistula*, 88.7.

<sup>63</sup> Augustine, *Epistula*, 88.10, 12.

the church. He writes: 'And in that way we bring some of them who consider the evidence of the truth and the beauty of peace, not to baptism, which like the mark of the king they had already received . . . but to the faith, which they lacked, and to the love of the Holy Spirit and to the body of Christ.'<sup>64</sup>

The development of Augustine's thought on state intervention was most clearly expressed in *Epistula* 93 written in 407 or 408 to Vincent. He began by reiterating that the Donatists' violent nature was the compelling factor that led the catholics to seek the help of the state.<sup>65</sup> Yet, Augustine admitted that, stemming from the influence of his fellow bishops, he began to regard coercion as an effective means of converting the Donatists to the unity of the church. He writes: 'For my opinion originally was that no one should be forced to the unity of Christ, but that we should act with words, fight with arguments, and conquer by reason. But this opinion of mine was defeated, not by the words of its opponents but, but by examples of those who offered proof.'<sup>66</sup> He adds: 'I think that it is not useless that they [the Donatists] be held in check and corrected by the authorities established by God.'<sup>67</sup> He continues the letter by arguing that the state's intervention and coercion is a form of healing and loving correction and that the Donatists were forced to do something that was actually good for them.<sup>68</sup> He writes:

Now you see, therefore, if I am not mistaken, that one ought not to consider the fact that anyone is constrained, but whether that to which one is constrained is good or bad. I do not say that a person can be good against his will. I say, however, that by fearing what he does not want to suffer, he abandons the stubbornness that holds him back or is compelled to recognize the truth he had not known. Thus out of fear he either rejects the error for which he is fighting or seeks the truth that he did not know, and he now willingly holds what he did not want to hold . . . We see that . . . many cities were Donatist and are now catholic, and they intensely hate the diabolical division and ardently desire unity.<sup>69</sup>

Augustine further expresses his conviction that government, the agents of coercion in this case, existed to serve the church. He writes: 'let the kings of the earth serve Christ even by issuing laws in Christ's favor!'<sup>70</sup>

After defending the state's intervention, Augustine takes time to teach on the true nature of the universal church, which he supports from the teaching of Cyprian and the Donatist theologian Tyconius.<sup>71</sup> Yet, Augustine warns Vincent about overemphasizing the teachings of a figure like Cyprian and urges him to find answers in the Holy Scriptures.<sup>72</sup> Finally, Augustine expresses the heart of a pastor and missionary longing to see Vincent and his fellow Donatists converted to the church: 'We seek you because you were lost in order that we may rejoice over you once you have been found, you over whom we grieved because you were lost. We call you heretics but only before you return to the catholic peace, before you strip off the error in which you were entangled.'<sup>73</sup>

Around 408, Augustine addressed *Epistula* 105 to the Donatists in general. He opens the letter by admitting his evangelistic motive for writing: 'The love of Christ, for whom we want to gain every human being . . . does not permit us to remain silent toward you.'<sup>74</sup> Augustine continues to remind the Donatists of the origin of the schism while challenging them on cases of violence.<sup>75</sup> He repeats the conviction that an earthly king can carry out God's will on earth and concludes by inviting the Donatist bishops to a conference.<sup>76</sup>

In 409 and 410, Augustine wrote two letters (*Epistulae* 106 and 108) to the Donatist bishop Macrobius. In *Epistula* 106, he rebukes Macrobius for re-baptizing one of Augustine's sub-deacons. In *Epistula* 108, Augustine continues by challenging the theology and practice of re-baptism by making an argument against it from the Scriptures,<sup>77</sup> by showing how Cyprian refused to allow the church to be divided,<sup>78</sup> and through exposing inconsistent practices of baptism among the Donatists themselves.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Augustine, *Epistula*, 88.9.

<sup>65</sup> Augustine, *Epistula*, 93.1.2.

<sup>66</sup> Augustine, *Epistula*, 93.5.17; also Lamirande, *Church, State, and Toleration*, pp. 7, 14-15.

<sup>67</sup> Augustine, *Epistula*, 93.1.1.

<sup>68</sup> Augustine, *Epistula*, 93.1.3; 2.4-8.

<sup>69</sup> Augustine, *Epistula*, 93.5.16.

<sup>70</sup> Augustine, *Epistula*, 93.5.19.

<sup>71</sup> Augustine, *Epistula*, 93.6.21; 7.22-23; 9.28-34; 10.40-45.

<sup>72</sup> Augustine, *Epistula*, 93.10.35-39.

<sup>73</sup> Augustine, *Epistula*, 93.11.46; see also 93.13.51.

<sup>74</sup> Augustine, *Epistula*, 105.1.

<sup>75</sup> Augustine, *Epistula*, 105.2, 4.

<sup>76</sup> Augustine, *Epistula*, 105.7, 11, 13.

<sup>77</sup> Augustine, *Epistula*, 108.8.

<sup>78</sup> Augustine, *Epistula*, 108.9-12.

<sup>79</sup> Augustine, *Epistula*, 108.2-7.

*Books and Visits.* Augustine only wrote one book to the Donatists during this period—*De unico baptismo contra Petilianum*, which he penned in 410 or 411. In a response to another pamphlet by the Donatist bishop Petilian, Augustine argued against the need for re-baptism and against dividing the church. As in other letters and books, he also appealed to the teachings of Cyprian on the unity of the church.<sup>80</sup>

Augustine only made one recorded visit to the Donatists between 405 and 411. Interestingly, he traveled to Cirta in 409 to visit the Donatist bishop, church leaders, and their congregation who had announced their desire to return to the catholic church. Hence, the purpose of this visit was not to persuade or convert but to welcome this group into the church.<sup>81</sup>

*Council of Carthage of 411.* Following the council of catholic bishops in June of 410, Augustine and the African bishops were granted their request by the Emperor Honorius for a mandatory face-to-face conference with the Donatists.<sup>82</sup> Having continually invited the Donatists to meet personally since becoming bishop in 395, Augustine's desire was fulfilled in the council of Carthage of 411.

From the outset of the 411 meeting, it was evident that the Donatist party would be defeated.<sup>83</sup> Though the gathering was called a conference, the presiding Roman official Marcellinus, a catholic layman and friend of Augustine, announced that the purpose of the council was 'to confirm the catholic faith.'<sup>84</sup> While the catholics surely had the advantage, the Donatist leaders proved to be quite defiant. Though Marcellinus had prescribed that each side would be represented by seven of its leaders, the entire Donatist delegation marched into the meeting place for the opening session.<sup>85</sup> As well, the Donatist bishop Petilianus demanded a roll call for each catholic and Donatist bishop claiming that the catholics had created bishops that did not exist.<sup>86</sup> After the second day of meeting, the Donatists petitioned for a recess to verify the records of the roll call. Further, Petilianus attempted to slander Augustine by referring to him as a Manichean. Augustine refused to fall into Petilianus' trap of personal accusation and graciously encouraged the Donatists to take their time and verify the record as well as to think about their arguments.<sup>87</sup> When the meeting re-convened five days later, Augustine's prowess as an apologist and rhetor were put on display as he masterfully defeated the Donatist leaders in debate by continually focusing on the core issue— the origins of the schism.<sup>88</sup> This, of course, had been his strategy in letters and books prior to the council of 411.

Though Marcellinus had clearly favored the catholics in the conference, Augustine's keen theological and rhetorical abilities only strengthened the verdict against the Donatists. As a result, the Donatists were ordered to give up their church buildings and to unify with the catholic church.

*Summary.* From the announcement of Honorius' edict of unity in 405 to the council of Carthage in 411 in which the Donatists were officially condemned, Augustine had fully accepted the intervention of the Roman authorities forcing the Donatists to unify with the catholic church. In his letters from this period, he clearly explains the development in his thought on the role of the secular authorities. Nevertheless, through his letters, book, and arguments at the 411 conference, he continued to show the errors of the origins of the schism, argued against re-baptism and church division, and taught on the true nature of the church. That is, even at this stage, he still seems to value persuasion as a means of converting the Donatists.

## Post-411

James J. O'Donnell asserts that despite the fact that the ruling at the council of Carthage in 411 was Augustine's greatest personal triumph, he never takes time to articulate his feelings about the catholic victory.<sup>89</sup> One explanation is that by 412, Augustine was fully occupied defending the church against the Pelagian controversy. Second, we should remember that Augustine was a pastor seeking to persuade a dissident group to join the church. Hence, he had no motivation to gloat over the Donatists as if they were conquered enemies on a battlefield. Yet Augustine did

<sup>80</sup> Maureen Tilley, 'Unico baptismo contra Petilianum, De,' *ATTA*, pp. 858-59.

<sup>81</sup> Augustine, *Epistula*, 144; Perler, *Les Voyages*, pp. 452-53.

<sup>82</sup> Perler, *Les Voyages*, pp. 277-78.

<sup>83</sup> For a thorough treatment of the council of 411, see Frend, *Donatist Church*, 275-89; see also Serge Lancel, ed., *Actes de la Conférence de Carthage en 411*, 3 vols. (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1972, 1975).

<sup>84</sup> Frend, *Donatist Church*, pp. 275, 280.

<sup>85</sup> The conference met on June 1, 3, and 8; see Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: a Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967, 2000), pp. 332-33.

<sup>86</sup> In the end the catholic bishops (both present and absent) numbered 286 while the Donatists numbered 284; see Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, pp. 332-33 and Frend, *Donatist Church*, p. 277.

<sup>87</sup> Frend, *Donatist Church*, p. 286; also Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, p. 334.

<sup>88</sup> Frend, *Donatist Church*, p. 286; and Perler, *Les Voyages*, p. 291.

<sup>89</sup> James J. O'Donnell, *Augustine: A New Biography* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005), p. 15.

continue to have contact with the Donatists after the council of Carthage. From 411 to 419, he continued to interact with them through letters, books, and at least one personal visit.

*Letters.* During the period following the conference, Augustine wrote two letters to the Donatists. Around 412, Augustine penned *Epistula* 141 on behalf of the North African bishops in response to some Donatist allegations that the catholics emerged victorious because Marcellinus had been bribed. Augustine answered succinctly by recounting each stage of the council, particularly those points where the Donatists admitted being at fault in the schism.

Between 411 and 414, Augustine wrote *Epistula* 173 to a Donatist priest named Donatus who had apparently resisted the closure of his church building and attempted to harm himself in the process.<sup>90</sup> Augustine defends the state's intervention by first arguing that coercion must be motivated by love. He writes:

If you could see the sorrow of my heart and my concern for your salvation, you would perhaps take pity on your soul, pleasing God by hearing not our word but his, and you would not fix his scriptures in your memory so that you close your heart against them. You are unhappy because you are being dragged to salvation, though you have dragged so many of our people to destruction. For what do we want but that you be seized, brought here, and kept from perishing?<sup>91</sup>

Augustine adds that the purpose of coercion is not merely restraining from evil, but also compelling one to do what is good.<sup>92</sup> Finally, despite acknowledging and defending the state's role in suppressing the Donatists, Augustine takes time in the letter to remind Donatus of the debate that took place at the council of 411—essentially appealing to his Donatist counterpart through reason and persuasion. He writes:

The mercy of God allowed both us and your bishops to come to Carthage in a very well-attended and large assembly and to discuss among ourselves in a most orderly fashion the disagreement between us. The acts were written down; our signatures were also obtained. Read them, or allow them to be read to you, and then choose what you will.<sup>93</sup>

*Books.* Following the 411 council, Augustine continued to write instructive and persuasive books to the Donatists. After receiving the acts of the council from Marcellinus, Augustine had them posted inside the churches in the provincial capitals of North Africa.<sup>94</sup> He also wrote the *Breviculus conlationis cum Donatistis*—a simplified account of the conference written in accessible language for those with limited education.

Also in 411, Augustine wrote *Contra Donatistas post conlationem*, a work intended for the Donatist laity in which Augustine shows how the Donatist bishops misinterpreted the Scriptures during the 411 council. As in previous works, he appeals to Cyprian's teaching on unity and urges the Donatists to be unified with the catholic church.<sup>95</sup>

In 419, Augustine authored his final anti-Donatist work, *Contra Gaudentium*. He was actually writing on behalf of the Roman official Dulcitius who, while attempting to carry out the anti-Donatist legislation in Numidia, was challenged by a Donatist leader named Gaudentius. In his work, Augustine refuted Gaudentius' claim that the Donatists were the persecuted group, challenged his interpretation of the Scriptures, as well as his interpretation of Cyprian.<sup>96</sup>

*Visit to Emeritus.* One of Augustine's key tasks after the 411 conference was helping the Donatists integrate into the catholic church by educating them from the acts of the council as well as from the Scriptures. We know that on at least two occasions, Augustine preached to the former Donatist congregations in Hippo and Cirta.<sup>97</sup>

Augustine's most famous visit at this stage came following the council of Carthage of 418 in which he made the fifteen-day journey (1100 km) to Mauretania Caesarea to meet the Donatist bishop Emeritus who was still refusing to unite with the catholic church.<sup>98</sup> Emeritus already had a reputation for being stubborn as was observed in

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<sup>90</sup> Augustine, *Epistula*, 173.4.

<sup>91</sup> Augustine, *Epistula*, 173.1.

<sup>92</sup> Augustine, *Epistula*, 173.2-4.

<sup>93</sup> Augustine, *Epistula*, 173.7; see also 173.9.

<sup>94</sup> Augustine, *Epistula*, 139.1; 28\*.2; Frend, *Donatist Church*, p. 290.

<sup>95</sup> Maureen Tilley, 'Donatistis post conlationem, *Contra*,' *ATTA*, p. 281.

<sup>96</sup> Maureen Tilley, 'Gaudentium, *Contra*,' *ATTA*, pp. 375-76.

<sup>97</sup> Augustine, *Epistulae*, 139.2; 144; Frend, *Donatist Church*, pp. 290-91; and Perler, *Les Voyages*, pp. 306-307.

<sup>98</sup> Perler, *Les Voyages*, pp. 466-67.

his role as a Donatist spokesperson at the 411 conference and through his prior correspondence with Augustine.<sup>99</sup> During the visit, Augustine preached the sermon, *Sermo ad Caesariensis ecclesiae plebem*, to Emeritus' congregation affirming them in their sincere faith while urging them to join the unity of the church.<sup>100</sup> In a separate meeting, Augustine publicly debated Emeritus appealing to him as a brother as well as arguing against the inconsistent re-baptism practices of the Donatists. The debate was recorded by copyists and has been preserved under the title *Gesta cum Emerito*.<sup>101</sup> It should be noted that Emeritus refused to be converted and probably remained a Donatist for the rest of his life.

The most significant aspect about this encounter is that seven years after Donatism was branded a criminal offense by the state, Augustine continues to appeal to Emeritus and his Donatist congregation through persuasion. Instead of making the long voyage to Mauretania Caesarea with an armed regiment of government soldiers to enforce legislation, Augustine simply arrives with the same arguments and appeals that had characterized his letters, books, and conferences for the previous twenty plus years.

### Conclusion

The position of this paper, given the narrative of Augustine's interaction with the Donatists, is that Augustine was motivated by and demonstrating a sense of Christian mission. What can we conclude about his mission practice and even theology of mission? First, Augustine's primary mission method was teaching. While always going back to the origins of the schism, he was very clear about the doctrines of baptism and church. Given the significant repetition of these teachings in letters, books, councils and public debates, we get a sense of Augustine's patience with the Donatists to be willing to continually address the same issues.

That said, from a missiological perspective, Augustine seems to have failed to connect with his audience, particularly in the area of communication. Though he produced more accessible publications for the less educated, his insistence on public debate was constantly resisted and thus ineffective.<sup>102</sup> He was approaching rather simple people from the posture of a philosopher and using methods that would have been more meaningful for pagans and Manicheans; not his Numidian neighbors.

Second, for Augustine, Christian mission flows from the church and back to the church.<sup>103</sup> Unlike the practice of many modern Protestant missionary societies that have lost the sense of church directed mission, Augustine approached mission—including the work of proclamation, catechesis, and baptism—within the context of the church. While the church at Hippo was his mission base, his end goal was to bring the Donatists back into communion with the great church. Though his regard for the Donatists is somewhat ambiguous—from schismatic to heretical--Augustine's ministry to the Donatists could very well construed as the work of evangelizing the church.

Finally, though Augustine acknowledges the role of the state in serving the purposes of the church, his preferred method of bringing the Donatists back into communion with the church was not through coercion but through persuasion. This was most apparent in his ongoing concern for persuasive methods even after the 411 Council of Carthage, particularly in his visit to Emeritus in 418.

Yet, when Augustine did allow for coercion, he seemed to accept it as a form of "tough love" that would lead to persuasion. Citing the account in the Gospels in which Jesus forcefully cleared out the moneychangers from the temple, Augustine likened the work of coercion to a physician administering medicine or painful treatment so that the patient would be healed.<sup>104</sup> Peter Brown adds that the Latin *cohertio*, from which we derive our word 'coercion,' is better translated as 'correction'; so, Augustine's *cohertio* was not that of a military commander but rather the correction of a loving parent.<sup>105</sup>

Burt argues that for Augustine 'any punishment imposed on heretics or schismatics had to be done out of love.'<sup>106</sup> This was most evident in his letter to Marcellinus in 411 as Marcellinus was in the process of ruling against the Donatists in court. Augustine writes:

<sup>99</sup> Augustine, *Epistula*, 88.

<sup>100</sup> Maureen Tilley, 'Sermo ad Caesariensis ecclesiae plebem,' *ATTA*, pp. 770-71.

<sup>101</sup> Maureen Tilley, 'Gesta cum Emerito,' *ATTA*, pp. 381-82.

<sup>102</sup> Augustine, *Retractationes*, 2.31.5; Frend, *Donatist Church*, p. 240; also Lamirande, *Church, State, and Toleration*, p. 23.

<sup>103</sup> For more discussion of the direction of mission see Bauckham, 'Mission as Hermeneutic.'

<sup>104</sup> Augustine, *Epistula*, 204.1; *Retractationes*, 1.12.6; Lamirande, *Church, State, and Toleration*, p. 63; Brown, 'Saint Augustine's attitude,' p. 108.

<sup>105</sup> Brown, 'Saint Augustine's attitude,' p. 114.

<sup>106</sup> Burt, *Friendship and Society*, p. 217.

Carry out, O Christian judge, the duty of a loving father. Be angry at wickedness in such a way that you remember to be humane, and do not turn the desire for revenge upon the atrocities of sinners, but apply the will to heal to the wounds of sinners.<sup>107</sup>

In light of this, Augustine urged the Roman officials not to apply the death penalty against the Donatists and, in other cases, he successfully interceded for convicted Donatist leaders who had been fined large sums of money for their crimes.

In short, Augustine regarded coercion as a means to persuasion. In a few letters and sermons, Augustine alludes to Jesus' invitation to the wedding banquet recorded in Luke 14:12-24.<sup>108</sup> That is, since the Donatists were unwilling to reason, they needed to be lovingly compelled to enter the banquet (the church) where they would be convinced of the truth. In *Sermo* 112, Augustine said as much: 'He who is compelled is forced to go where he does not wish to go, but when he has entered, he shares willingly in the banquet.'<sup>109</sup> For Augustine forcing the Donatists to unite with the church simply put them in an environment where they could be persuaded. In one sense, Augustine can identify with the Donatists because he had also been drawn by God from the Manichean heresy to the church at Milan at to its Bishop Ambrose. He testified: 'Unknowingly I was led by you to him, so that through him I might be led, knowingly to you.'<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Augustine, *Epistula*, 133.2.

<sup>108</sup> Augustine, *Epistulae*, 93.2.5; 173.1; 185.6.24; 208.7; also *Sermo*, 112.

<sup>109</sup> Augustine, *Sermo*, 112.1-7 cited in Lamirande, *Church, State, and Toleration*, p. 57.

<sup>110</sup> Augustine, *Confessiones*, 5.13.23.