

# Christian Messenger.

A REPOSITORY OF RELIGIOUS, POLITICAL, AND GENERAL INTELLIGENCE.

"NOT SLOTHFUL IN BUSINESS: FERVENT IN SPIRIT."

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## Poetry.

### The Pilgrim.

We journey in a vale of tears;  
But often from on high  
The glorious bow of God appears,  
And lights up all our sky.  
Then through the breaking clouds of heaven  
Far distant visions come,  
And sweetest words of grace are given,  
To cheer the Pilgrim home.

Then doubt and darkness flee away,  
And shadows all are gone—  
Oh! if such moments would but stay,  
This earth and heaven were one.  
Too soon the vision is withdrawn;  
There's only left, "He saith,"  
And I, a lonely pilgrim, turn,  
To live and walk by faith.

Yet e'en for glimpses such as these  
My soul would cheerful bear  
All that in darkest days it sees,  
The toil, the pain, the care,  
For though the conflict and the race,  
Whatever grief my lot,  
If Jesus shows his lovely face,  
All troubles are forgot.

My quickened soul, in faith and love,  
Mounts up on eagles' wings,  
And at the city gates above  
Exulting sits and sings!  
Thy through thy sufferings, O my Lord,  
I hope that world to see,  
And through those gates, at thy sweet word,  
To enter in, to thee!

## Baptist History.

For the Christian Messenger.

### A SERIES OF LETTERS TO A YOUNG CHRISTIAN.

LETTER VII.

#### The Transition Period.

[Concluded.]

MR YOUNG FRIEND,

I promised in my last to give you an account of the Novatians and Donatists, the two leading sects of the period now under consideration. There were many other sects, so called, for it was the fashion to designate as a "heretic" every individual who thought differently from the majority, and to consider those who agreed with him as constituting a party, usually bearing his name. If we were to do so now, the multiplication of sects would be indefinite.

Novatian lived at Rome. He had embraced Christianity, but his baptism had been deferred, and in a sickness which threatened to be fatal he had been sprinkled as he lay on his bed, as it was impossible to immerse him. This is the first recorded instance of *clitic* baptism. It was in fact, as you are aware, no baptism at all, though it differed from infant sprinkling. In the latter, both the subject and the act are wrong. In Novatian's case, there was a proper subject, but the ceremony performed was not baptism, though it was the best substitute they could think of. It shows us, by the way, how error was creeping in. Novatian ought to have waited for his recovery, when he would have been in a fit state to receive the ordinance. Had it pleased God that his sickness should be fatal, he would have died without baptism, and he would have been in David's position, who desired to build the temple, but was not permitted. The desire was approved, though the purpose was not accomplished. He "did well that it was in his heart." Already, however, the pernicious notion of the necessity of baptism for salvation had become prevalent, and consequently Novatian was sprinkled.

Now and then a case of that kind occur-

red. The impropriety was so far acknowledged that the clinics were not allowed to enter the ministry. But Novatian was an exception to the common practice. His talents and zeal were such that he could not be kept out of the sacred office. He soon became a popular preacher. On the death of Fabian, bishop of Rome, in the year 250, there was a strong desire that Novatian should succeed him, and so he would, had it not been for his known sentiments on one point. Lax habits of discipline, as he believed, had grown up, and were very mischievous in their tendencies. In the Decian persecution great numbers had apostatized, who, on the return of tranquility, sought re-admission into the churches. Novatian differed from his brethren on this subject. He held that apostasy was a sin which wholly disqualified an individual for restoration to christian fellowship, and that it would be destructive to the purity of the church to re-admit those who had so grossly fallen. God might pardon them. They might find a place in heaven. But the Church must not be defiled, for it is a congregation of saints. Now, whatever opinion we may form respecting Novatian's particular theory, it is undeniable that the principle on which it rested was derived from the New Testament. Yet it was too spiritual for the times. A majority declared in favor of Cornelius, who was duly installed bishop of Rome. Nevertheless, the minority would not yield. The time had come (so they argued,) for a decided stand. The holiness of the church was in danger, and must be maintained at all hazards. Separation was better than corruption. They withdrew, formed a separate church, and invited Novatian to become their pastor. Others imitated their example in various parts of the empire, and Novatian churches sprang up in great abundance. They continued in existence more than three centuries. In all the principal towns and cities, these dissenting communities might be found. They were the "Puritans" of those days, and were so designated. There was a wholesome rivalry for some time between them and the "orthodox" or "catholic" body, each operating as a stimulus and a check to the other.

Carrying out their governing principles in all its details they baptized all who joined their churches, even though they had been already baptized by ministers of the orthodox body, deeming the baptism of a corrupt church invalid. They were therefore the first "Anabaptists," in the strict and proper sense of that word. They were also genuine reformers. Dr. Waddington, an Episcopalian historian, observes, that Novatian "considered the genuine church of Christ to be a society where virtue and innocence reigned universally, and refused any longer to acknowledge those as its members, who had even once degenerated into unrighteousness. His followers were called Cathari or Puritans, and they comprehended many austere and independent Christians, in the east no less than in the west. But this endeavour to revive the spotless moral purity of the primitive faith was found inconsistent with the corruptions even of that early age: it was regarded with suspicion by the leading prelates, as a vain and visionary scheme; and those rigid principles which had characterized and sanctified the church in the first century, were abandoned to the profession of schismatic sectaries in the third." (History of the church, vol. i. p. 166. Second Edition.)

There is no evidence that at the time of Novatian's separation from the Roman church infant baptism had found its way to Italy. The probability is all on the other side, since, one hundred and sixty years

after that event we find Boniface, bishop of Rome, propounding doubts and questions to Augustine which indicated that infant baptism was looked on by him quite distrustfully. Those difficulties would not have existed if he had believed that the rite had a divine origin. The incongruity between the ceremonial employed and the reality struck him forcibly. The ceremonial had been originally prepared for catechumens, and was then a reasonable service. When infants were substituted for catechumens, the same forms were observed, but they were strangely out of place. In answer to the usual question, the sponsor replied on behalf of the infant, "I believe," whereas, as Boniface remarked, not only was the child unable to believe, but no one could tell whether he would believe in after life or not. No wonder the good man was puzzled. It reminds me of an incident that occurred in England some years ago. A lad, the child of Baptist parents, was sent to a School where the church of England Catechism was taught. Abraham (that was his name) was compelled to stand up with the other boys. It happened one day that it came to his turn to answer this question—"Why then are infants baptized, when by reason of their tender age they cannot perform them?" [that is, the conditions, of repentance and faith]? Abraham looked full in his master's face, and said, "Why indeed, Sir?" He was not asked to recite any more. Abraham became afterwards a useful Baptist minister.

Novatianism and infant baptism were diametrically opposed to each other. It was impossible to preserve the purity for which the Novatians contended in any church which had admitted the novel institution. Those who had been baptized in infancy might evince, when they reached maturity, an utter destitution of vital godliness, and consequent unfitness for union with a christian body; but being already members by virtue of their baptism they could not be expelled unless they fell into gross vice, and so their influence and example might operate most injuriously on the religious character of the church. This could not escape the observation of Novatian Christians. It would prove a salutary caution. We may safely infer that they abstained from compliance with the innovation, and that the Novatian churches were what are now called Baptist churches, adhering to the apostolic and primitive practice. Had the writings of Novatian authors been preserved, we should have had more explicit information; but it was the ancient policy to destroy all books written by alleged heretics. Novatian published a work on the Trinity, which has not been involved in the common destruction. A copy of it is now before me. It is generally commended for its clearness and orthodoxy, but there is no allusion to the baptismal controversy.

The Donatists first appeared in the early part of the fourth century. A dispute about an election to a bishopric was the occasion of their separation from the catholic church. Cecilian was chosen bishop of Carthage in a somewhat irregular manner, and hastily ordained. Among those who officiated at his ordination was Felix, bishop of Aptunga. This man was said to be a *traditor*, that is, one who had delivered up copies of the scriptures to the civil authorities during the Diocletian persecution. His concurrence in the ordination was thought by some to vitiate the service. They refused to regard Cecilian as a regularly appointed bishop. A secession took place, which spread rapidly and extensively, so that in a short time the Donatist churches in Asia were nearly equal in number to those of the hitherto dominant party.

As in the case of the Novatians, the discussion of the general question of church purity arose out of the circumstances that originated the division. The Donatists pleaded for purity. They maintained that Christian churches should consist of godly persons, and no others, and that in all the arrangements made for their management that important principle should be kept in view. They followed the example of the Novatians in rebaptizing those who joined them from other churches. They baptized new converts on a profession of faith, as a matter of course, for that was the practice of all churches. Whether they went further than this is open to dispute. Their principles would undoubtedly lead them to the rejection of infant baptism. Some authors affirm that they did reject it. For my own part, I am disposed to hesitate on that point. The investigation is not yet completed, but at present I am inclined to think that they were divided in opinion, and that some of them admitted infant baptism, though the admission was inconsistent with their acknowledged principles. The majority, I am willing to believe, adhered to the New Testament practice.

There is another circumstance proper to be mentioned. The difference between the Donatists and their opponents had been submitted several times to imperial decision. In the first instance the Donatists, it appears, consented to the reference; but they soon discovered the impropriety. "What has the Emperor to do with the church? What have Christians to do with Kings, or bishops at court?—they asked. Were they not right? Have not the Baptists been distinguished in all ages by the maintenance of these views? Have they not ever held that civil government has nothing to do with religion, that christianity asks for no support from the State, and that the union of Church and State has been productive of some of the worst evils that have defiled the christian profession? Have they not always repudiated the use of carnal weapons in the defence and propagation of the truth, and demanded, for themselves and for all men, entire freedom of thought and action in all religious concerns? This is their glory, and no man can take it from them.

Both the Novatians and the Donatists suffered severely for their dissent—especially the latter. The celebrated Augustine taught the unchristian doctrine that heresy should be suppressed by the civil magistrate, and invoked the imperial sword against the Donatists. Their property was confiscated, the prisons were crammed with them, and great numbers lost their lives by the hands of the executioner. A sanguinary law was enacted, that the re-baptizer and the re-baptized should be put to death. That so atrocious an enactment should excite tumults in a country where the re-baptizers constitute one-half of the christian population, cannot be considered surprising. Other persons, not connected with them, took advantage of it, and great disorders ensued. But Augustine and his party were the aggressors.

Pelagianism troubled the church in the fifth century. As Pelagius taught that infants derive no moral taint from Adam's transgression, it has been inferred that he was of necessity an opposer of infant baptism, since it had then become a generally admitted notion that baptism cleanses from original sin. Pelagius, however, did not deny the propriety of baptizing infants, who obtained, he said, the kingdom of heaven by their baptism, which "kingdom of heaven" he distinguished from eternal life, and represented as a kind of intermediate state. I need not dwell on such follies, and therefore pass on to observe that as many in