

3 Lessons From History on How the Church Can Turn Back the Threat of ISIS

“We have never seen anything like it, and we must be ready for anything,” were the words of Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel in discussing the threat of the jihadist ISIS movement with an obvious note of concern in his voice. Military and intelligence officials obviously are taking very serious the threat of ISIS to bring its horrific brand of terror to America and fly its flag over the White House. Could it happen?

We must remember that this battle will not be won ultimately with jet fighters and tanks because, at its core, this is an ideological war for truth. This is why a strong and vibrant Christianity that can wage spiritual warfare is absolutely necessary. This is why we must pray for another Great Awakening in our land. This is why we also must learn from history, from those who have preceded us.

There is an example from the early history of the church that has amazing parallels to our nation and its current situation with radical Islam. Like America, this area saw great moves of God and became the bastion of Christianity from the second through the sixth centuries. The light of the Gospel shined brightly and there emerged some of the greatest leaders and thinkers the church has known.

Yet, because of certain trends that weakened and watered down the faith of the Christians of this area, it fell to Islam in the seventh century and is still under Islamic control today.

In this article, I share three important lessons from this period; three things we must avoid in order to not repeat the mistakes of the North African Church and suffer a similar

fate.

The Power and Prominence of the North African Church

Beginning in the first century, perhaps with the Ethiopian official whom Philip led to Christ (Acts 8:26-40), Christianity spread rapidly across North Africa. Paganism and false religions fell like dominoes as the message of Christ swept across the continent. Tertullian (160-220), the famous North African church father and apologist, wrote to a pagan official: "We are but of yesterday, and yet we have filled all the places that belong to you—cities, islands, forts, towns, exchanges; the very military camps themselves, tribes, town councils, the palace, the senate, the market-place; we have left you nothing but your temples."

Along with Tertullian, unusually gifted Christian leaders, such as Cyprian and Augustine, emerged in North Africa. They formulated theologies that are still the basis for much of the thinking in both Catholicism and Protestantism.

The North African church gained such prominence that it was appealed to for advice by churches of other nations and regions. On one occasion, the North African Church even rebuked a Roman bishop, Zosimus, for his acceptance of Pelagian teachers and teaching. The influence of the North African Church is shown in that the Roman bishop, after receiving their letter, carefully began to back away from his support of Pelagius. He eventually reversed his position and adopted the position of the North African Church.

In its heyday, no one would have guessed that Christian North Africa would fall to Islam. Nonetheless, that is exactly what happened in the seventh century. Here are three trends (or sins) in the North African church that we must avoid in order to help guarantee that we will not suffer a similar fate.

1. Avoid Being Divisive

It is one thing to disagree; it is another thing to be divisive. Christians can disagree in nonessential issues and still be one in Christ. A divisive spirit, however, divides and weakens the church, making it vulnerable to outside forces that want to destroy it. Divisiveness was a major factor that weakened the North African Church and made it vulnerable to the attacks of Islam in the seventh century.

This divisive spirit showed itself especially in the Donatist controversy that erupted early in the fourth century. It was centered around whether those who had denied the faith in recent persecutions could, now that persecution was past, become leaders in the church. One group led by Donatus insisted on high standards for those in leadership, while the other side insisted on mercy toward those who had recanted their faith in the past and allowing them to serve as bishops and leaders.

This controversy eventually caused a split in the North African Church. The Donatist churches, with their emphasis on high moral standards for their members and leaders, grew rapidly and soon rivaled in number the orthodox or Catholic churches of North Africa.

The rivalry was intense and was only resolved (outwardly) when the Roman emperor, in response to an appeal by Augustine, outlawed the Donatist churches, arrested their leaders and confiscated their properties and buildings, giving them to the Catholics. This controversy and the strong-arm tactics that were used to resolve it left a deep wound in the North African church from which it never recovered.

Avoid being divisive. Satan's tactic is "divide and conquer." We must be uncompromising about truth, but at the same time, be careful that we are not so intent on digging up the tares that we also uproot the wheat in the process (Matt. 13:29).

2. Avoid a "Watering Down" of the Faith

The Donatist controversy was indicative of a “watering down” of the call of the Gospel to discipleship and absolute commitment to Christ. Yes, we must offer mercy, forgiveness and redemption in the Name of Christ to a broken and fragmented world; but we must, at the same time, make clear the call to absolute surrender to Christ and His Lordship, which is just as clear in the Gospels.

The evidence indicates that as North African Christianity became more and more institutionalized and formalized, individual faith became tied to going through the outward motions and rituals required by the institutionalized church. The dynamic faith of earlier generations gradually eroded and was replaced by an outward, political-ceremonial sort of Christianity.

North African Christianity became soft and self-centered. As individual commitment to Christ waned and moral laxity increased, the church was further weakened, making it vulnerable to the committed armies of Islam when they arrived on the scene. We must not allow this to happen to our generation, which is why we must pray for another Great Awakening in our land

In his 1961 inaugural address, President John F. Kennedy threw out a challenge to the American people. He said, “Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.” I believe, in a similar way, God is calling his people today to make a shift from a watered-down, me-centered approach to the Gospel to a selfless, Christ-centered approach. In this new attitude and mindset we are no longer preoccupied with what God will do for us, but our consuming passion is now to know His heart and do His will.

3. Avoid Pursuits of Power

Power struggles go right along with a divisive spirit. Nothing weakens the church as much as internal power struggles for

prominence and control. Many power struggles emerged in the church in North Africa, especially as it aligned itself more and more with the Roman political order.

This was another criticism of the Donatists toward the mainstream church—its alignment with the Roman state. “What has the emperor to do with the church?” they asked. When Augustine became the bishop of Hippo in 395 he sought reconciliation with the Donatists, for the separation had occurred before his time.

Augustine, however, did not see unity as occurring through a mutual acceptance of one another in Christ. Augustine came to faith post-Constantine and he saw the church as an institution with clearly defined organizational parameters and a divinely ordained hierarchical leadership. As far as he was concerned, the Donatists were sheep that had gone astray and the only path for reconciliation and unity was for them to return to the Catholic fold, which they had left.

When the Donatists rebuffed Augustine’s overture, he appealed to the Roman emperor to intervene. After a conference conducted by the emperor’s envoy, the Donatists were condemned and declared illegal. Heavy fines were levied on all members of the Donatist churches and they were ordered to return to the Catholic fold. Donatist property and houses of worship were confiscated and given to Augustine and his group. Those who refused to comply were imprisoned or executed. Some fled to the desert, and others committed suicide rather than submit to the imperial decree.

The power struggles in the North African church greatly weakened it and made it vulnerable to the Islamic invaders when they arrived. We must remember the words of Jesus to His apostles when he rebuked them for pursuing power and exhorted them to function as servants (Mark 10:35-45). Only as Christian leaders have the confidence to be servants to the people of God will we see the body of Christ equipped to rise

up in great strength and power, able to conquer every foe with the truth of the Gospel.

Why I Expect Another Great Awakening

When Muslim armies began invading North Africa around the middle of the seventh century, the once powerful North African Church did not have the internal strength of a vital faith and moral character to put up a defense, and they succumbed to the invaders. The noted church historian, Philip Schaff, says, "A large number of nominal Christians who had so fiercely quarreled with each other about unfruitful subtleties of their creeds, surrendered their faith to the conqueror." Muslim armies eventually swept across the entire continent bringing an end to Christianity's prominence and replacing the cross with the crescent. That is still the state of North Africa today.

I do not believe this will happen to America. I do not deny that it could, nor do I take the threat lightly. I also realize there could be individual acts of terrorism on our soil in the days ahead. Nonetheless, I believe the people of God in this nation are rising to the occasion. I believe churches, ministries, groups and fellowships are calling one another to a new consecration and commitment to Jesus Christ.

I believe more and more people are praying in sincere faith for another Great Awakening in our land. Because of this, I believe we'll see a mighty outpouring of the Holy Spirit sweep across this nation and around the world. I believe God is hearing our prayers and, as He promised in 2 Chron. 7:14, He will *heal our land*.

Eddie Hyatt is an author, ordained minister and founder/director of Revive America. Through Revive America his goal is to help lay the biblical and historical foundation for another Great Awakening in our land. If you would like to host a Revive America event with your group or congregation,

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