

EX POST FACTO

Journal of the History Students at San Francisco State University

VOLUME XVIII

2009

BONIFACE AND HERESY IN EIGHTH-CENTURY FRANKIA

Rebecca A. Devlin

THIS inquiry was sparked by a reference made to a renegade priest who preached in Frankia in the first half of the eighth century. The scholarly consensus suggests a lull in heretical opposition during the period between the fifth and eleventh centuries. Exploration of a significant religious figure of the time, Saint Boniface, reveals that there were indeed several named heretics who preached doctrines that diverged significantly from those accepted by the Church and who had attracted considerable followings. Even more significant are the issues concerning the morality of the clergy in Frankia. Although largely absent in the historiography, the sources reveal a persistent and prevalent problem of clerical promiscuity that should be considered within a heretical framework.

The missionary work of Boniface, who was born Wynfrith around 672, can be divided into several different stages. He first left England in order to continue the work of Willibrord and preach to the heathens in Frisia in around 716. This effort, however, ended quickly when fighting broke out between Charles Martel and Radbod.¹ He did not return to continue this mission until 754. Instead, he was commissioned by Gregory II in 722 to minister to the German pagans east of the Rhine.² Gregory commended Boniface to Charles Martel, requesting that the duke assist and protect him as he carried out his mission. Charles Martel guaranteed his support for Boniface and called for all of the Frankish ecclesiastical and secular leaders to do the same.³ During this period, Boniface focused primarily on the work of conversion. His correspon-

¹ Willibald, *Life of Saint Boniface* (Internet Medieval Sourcebook, 2000), 4, <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/willibald-boniface.html>.

² Boniface, *The Letters of Saint Boniface*, trans. Ephraim Emerton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940), 17.

³ *Ibid.*, 17, 20, 22.

dence about his interactions with the already established churches in the region reveals, however, that reform was also necessary.

In 732, Gregory III promoted Boniface to be the missionary archbishop of the region. This was a unique appointment for although he was archbishop, he did not have a designated see. It is at this point that he began a stage of his work that was more earnestly centered on reform. With the pallium, he was given the authority to ordain bishops to assist him with those who were Christians in the region. He needed help managing both the newly converted and those who had merely fallen into behavior at odds with apostolic authority.⁴ He also began to work to address the ills of the already established churches in Bavaria, Hesse, Thuringia, and Alemannia. In 739, he reorganized the church in Bavaria by dividing it into four districts, each with its own bishop.⁵ In 742, Boniface wrote to Zacharias to recognize his accession to the papacy. He also informed the new pope that Carloman had requested that Boniface call a synod in order to begin the process of implementing ecclesiastical reform in the duke's region of the Frankish kingdom.⁶ Indeed efforts were made to hold such synods annually in order to continue the reforming process.

In the last stage of Boniface's life, he returned to his earliest callings. In 751, Boniface informed the pope that he was building a monastery in the wilderness for Benedictine monks, and requested permission to partially retire there. By the end of the year, Zacharias had graciously granted the elderly archbishop's request and endowed the monastery built on the Fulda River with the rights of the apostolic privilege.⁷ In 754, Boniface returned to Frisia to continue the work he had started as part of his first mission, but this would be his last endeavor. According to his biographer, Willibald, Boniface experienced considerable success converting and baptizing the heathens and had organized a day of confirmation for all the newly converted. Armed men, however, attacked the saint and his accompanying clergy and Boniface was martyred; his remains were brought to Fulda, as per his request.⁸

Some insight can be gained about Boniface from the biographies written about him, especially the one written by Willibald shortly after his martyrdom. His correspondence, however, is the richest source for the saint. The collection includes letters written both to him and by him, and span from his earliest years in Frisia until just after his death. He was

⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 86, 89.

⁸ Willibald, *Life of Saint Boniface*, 8.

in communication with a range of different people, including nuns, abbesses, and bishops in England, dukes and kings in Frankia, and all four of the popes who reigned during his lifetime. These letters reveal much about his personality, concerns, relationships, reading material, and sources of authority. For example, in 735, Boniface wrote to Archbishop Nothelm of Canterbury concerning a “sin,” which Boniface feared he might have inadvertently committed: he had granted a man the right to marry the widow of his godchild.⁹ Nothelm told him that there must be a divorce, as the Romans considered it a capital sin. Unable to understand why this was such a grave sin, Boniface sought help in finding where it was written in the decrees of the Catholic Fathers, canons, or the Holy Writ. He found it inconceivable that it could be so significant, since baptism made all people brothers and sisters in Christ. The letter provides a glimpse of the dynamics of Boniface’s personality. Although he was convinced that he was right, Boniface was still troubled that he had even been accused of being sinful. Furthermore, the letter shows he based his authority on the Church Fathers, canon law, and the Bible. In a response to an abbess who sought advice on whether or not it was proper for her to travel to Rome on a pilgrimage, we see more of Boniface’s willful nature. She was inclined to make the trip, although her superiors told her not to go. Boniface advised her that if she could not find freedom from worldly concerns at home, and needed to go in order to find a quiet mind, then by all means she should make the journey. His only reservation was that she should wait until she had received word that the Muslim assaults had died down.¹⁰

As a missionary and a reformer, Boniface clearly played a significant role in shaping the German and Frankish churches. Much academic attention has focused on his English heritage and the nature of his monastic background, in order to determine what influences he brought to the continent. Christopher Holdsworth, for example, has tried to determine whether the saint exclusively followed the Benedictine Rule. In short, he concludes that in his early years, Boniface largely adhered to what is considered the *regula mixta*, but as he aged, he became increasingly more devoted to the standards of Saint Benedict. Boniface had his own interpretation of these rules, however, throughout his life.¹¹

Another major focus of the scholarship on Boniface is the role he played in bringing the Frankish church more directly under the authority

⁹ Boniface, *Letters*, 63.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹¹ Christopher Holdsworth, “Saint Boniface and Europe,” in *The Greatest Englishman: Essays on St. Boniface and the Church at Crediton*, ed. Timothy Reuter (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1980), 49–67.

of Rome, and in advancing the central authority of the papacy in general. In his early work on the subject, John Seville Higgins suggests that Rome was in a position to take more power because the Muslims had wiped out every other apostolic see, creating a power vacuum. He also points out that due to the Byzantine conflict over iconoclasm, Rome had made a break with the East and sought protection in the West. Charles Martel was an obvious choice, especially since his brother-in-law was the king of the Lombards. Higgins argues that Boniface was particularly disposed toward Rome and characterizes the reforms he instituted, and especially the synods, as a power struggle between the Frankish leaders and the papacy. He asserts that the Frankish church had become a province of Rome and exercised increased authority from 750 on, due largely to Boniface's ultramontane policy.¹² Higgins's argument is based on the assumption that before Boniface, Rome had very little authority or influence in Frankia. Wilhelm Levison, who has long been considered an authority on Boniface—especially in terms of the continental background to his mission—supports this claim. He points to the importance of a mandate given to Boniface by Gregory II to preach in German lands, and an oath made by the missionary promising his obedience to the Apostolic See, the pope, and his successors as important steps toward bringing the Frankish church within the Roman sphere. Levison also notes the declaration made at the reforming synods held under Boniface, who due to his English heritage was naturally inclined toward Roman authority. The bishops present signed the decrees of the council with a pledge to uphold Catholic unity and to be subjects to the Roman church, St. Peter and his vicar. Levison asserts that this was an entirely innovative profession and is symbolic of the new level of influence Rome exerted due to Boniface.¹³

J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, writing several decades after Levison, asserts that although the Merovingian connections with Rome were not based on conciliar activity, there was nevertheless an important link between the papacy and this dynasty. As evidence, he cites that in Frankia, during the period before Charles Martel, specific Roman liturgies were practiced, there was a marked growth of the cult of St. Peter, great importance was placed on pilgrimages to Rome, and there was an established practice of the Rule of St. Benedict.¹⁴ And so, he downplays Boniface's

¹² John Seville Higgins, "The Ultramontanism of Saint Boniface," *Church History* 2, no. 4 (Dec. 1933): 197–210.

¹³ Wilhelm Levison, "Boniface: German Mission and Reform of the Frankish Church," in *England and the Continent in the Eighth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946), 70–93.

¹⁴ J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Early Medieval History* (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1975), 140–141.

role in bringing the Frankish church under Roman influence. He also cautions against viewing Boniface as a mere “pawn” in the political agendas of Charles Martel and the papacy. He asserts that neither side was in a hurry to make changes that would bring about their interdependence. Instead, he characterizes Boniface’s life in terms of what he considers his ultimate goal of converting “his Saxon blood-brothers.”¹⁵

Most works on Boniface address the heretical figures named in the sources in no more than a cursory manner. Only Jeffrey Burton Russell offers a comprehensive analysis of some of these fascinating figures. In *Dissent and Order in the Middle Ages*, Russell argues that the period from the Council of Chalcedon in 451 to about 1000 was marked by a decline in religious dissent. He attributes this to the lack of an ultimate source of orthodox authority.¹⁶ In “Saint Boniface and the Eccentrics,” however, he asserts that Boniface’s correspondence is evidence that there were indeed heresies in the eighth century.¹⁷ This article explores two men discussed in Boniface’s correspondence: Aldebert and Clemens. They were both brought before the synod held by Boniface, and when they persisted in their heresy, they were tried at the Roman synod held in 745.¹⁸

Aldebert was a Gaul whose followers regarded him as their intercessor and a miracle worker. He claimed to have been blessed by the grace of God while still in his mother’s womb. Furthermore, he carried with him a letter from Jesus, which he claimed fell from the sky and confirmed his authority. Boniface tells us that he bribed bishops to ordain him and considered himself equal with the Apostles. He set himself up in the field and near springs with crosses and dedicated these oratories in his own name. Many came to hear him preach and he told them they need not confess their sins, for he knew them and granted them forgiveness. He also distributed his fingernails and hair as if they were the sacred relics of a saint. In a prayer that he wrote, he called upon, “Angel Uriel, Angel Raguel, Angel Tubuel, Angel Michael, Angel Adinus, Angel Tubuas, Angel Sabaoc, and Angel Simiel.” Pope Zacharias declared that these were not angels, but rather the names of devils. Russell analyzes these names and concludes that although five of the eight have Gnostic connections, Aldebert was likely not a Gnostic. Instead, he suggests that Aldebert compiled the names thoughtlessly from liturgies that listed

¹⁵ Ibid., 152–160.

¹⁶ Jeffrey B. Russell, *Dissent and Order in the Middle Ages: The Search for Legitimate Authority* (New York: Maxwell Macmillan International, 1992), 9–11.

¹⁷ Jeffrey B. Russell, “Saint Boniface and the Eccentrics,” *Church History* 33, no. 3 (Sept. 1964): 243–244.

¹⁸ A record of this synod is found in Boniface, *Letters*, 59. The discussion is taken from this source unless otherwise noted.

both the acceptable and disreputable angels.¹⁹ Zacharias pronounced him mad, especially for his use of the letter. He declared, “all who make use of this wickedly invented letter are lacking in mind and memory like children or senseless women.”

Clemens was accused of a different kind of heresy. He denied the teachings of Augustine, Jerome, and Gregory, and rejected the authority of the canons and councils. He insisted that he could become a bishop even though he had two children, and that he could marry his brother’s widow. For this, he was accused of being a Judaizer. He also asserted that when Christ descended into hell he released everyone there, including unbelievers, pagans, and idolaters. Boniface sought imprisonment for both the heretics, but Zacharias did not request this from the temporal authorities. Instead, he declared that Clemens be stripped of his priestly function and be “bound with the chains of anathema.” Aldebert was also to be removed from the priesthood, but he was given the opportunity to do penance. If he returned to his erroneous ways, he too would be declared anathema. Several years later, we find that they both did indeed persist in their heretical ways and were going to be brought before another synod, although there is no record of this ever taking place.²⁰

The sources, then, make it clear that Russell is correct in arguing that there were named heretics in the eighth century. Boniface also faced significant problems within the ranks of the established and ordained clergy. He referred to these men as false priests rather than heretics because they were serving in an official capacity within the church as priests, deacons, and bishops. The correspondence reveals that there were several types of offenses that troubled Boniface. First, there seems to have been a consistent problem with priests who lied about the nature of their relationship with Rome. In 732, Gregory III wrote to Boniface about a certain priest. This priest had apparently come to Boniface saying that he had confessed his crimes to the pope and received absolution and permission to return to his “evil lusts.” Boniface clearly doubted the validity of this declaration and wrote to Rome. Gregory III confirmed that the priest was indeed lying and gave Boniface permission to “discipline him according to the sacred canons.”²¹ This type of transgression, although troublesome to Boniface, can be seen as being more emblematic of the period than indicative of the state of the Frankish clergy in particular. Such difficulties are understandable when efforts to communicate and maintain church unity over such large distances necessitated laborious travel.

¹⁹ Russell, “Saint Boniface and the Eccentrics,” 236–238.

²⁰ Boniface, *Letters*, 77.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 28.

Boniface also expressed concerns involving the conduct of the clergy. He frequently complained, for example, that they were murderers. What Boniface meant by this label is clarified in a letter that Pope Zacharias wrote to the Frankish clergy, dukes, and counts in 745. In this letter, Zacharias beseeched these leaders to follow Boniface's instructions in order that he might provide them with the proper guidance they had been lacking up until his arrival. Apparently, before Boniface, priests had been expected to fight in the campaigns waged by secular leaders. In this capacity, they killed both pagans and Christians. Zacharias expressed his outrage that it was not understood that the role of the priest was not to slaughter, but rather to administer the sacraments and attempt to convert those not already brought into the Christian fold. He insisted that a distinction must be made between the clergy and the laity in this respect, as it was sacrilegious for priests to perform "the sacred mysteries and [offer] the body of the Lord Christ" when their hands were made impure by the blood of those killed. He suggested that this transgression might be the cause of their failure against the heathens.²²

Although the prevalence of "murderous" priests was clearly a problematic condition, those involved cannot be deemed heretical. Instead, the situation can be seen as a reflection of the general state of the Frankish church prior to Boniface's arrival and the fact that it had significantly been under the leadership of the local secular authorities rather than under the hierarchy of Rome. Furthermore, the Merovingians—and especially the Carolingians after them—were consistently involved in military campaigns, which often also included missionary components.²³ Without a clear separation between temporal and ecclesiastical authority, the clergy were under the leadership of those leading the military campaigns and thus were expected to serve in this capacity. After this admonishment from Zacharias, there is no evidence that lay or church leaders insisted that it was valid for the clergy to continue to serve in the military. This does not imply that such actions did not continue, but rather simply indicates that there was not a persistent belief held in opposition to apostolic authority.

A final clerical misconduct about which Boniface expressed a great deal of concern, was the tendency for priests to succumb to carnal sin. His frequent references to adulterers and fornicators among the clergy make it clear that for him it was an important and prevalent issue. For

²² *Ibid.*, 61.

²³ Wallace-Hadrill, *Early Medieval History*, 141–142. Wallace-Hadrill argues that beginning with Charles Martel, these campaigns can more appropriately be considered "planned military conquest," and that those against German lands were aimed specifically at Frankish absorption.

example, in a letter written to Zacharias in 742—after recognizing his accession to the papacy—Boniface explained the pernicious situation to the new pontiff. He described deacons who had lived “since boyhood in debauchery, adultery, and every kind of filthiness.” He went on to lament that they had several concubines and continued these vices once they entered the priesthood. Boniface requested that Zacharias grant him the authority to judge and punish these men by apostolic authority.²⁴ In contrast to the other transgressions discussed, this issue of adulterous clergy members was more entrenched in the Frankish church, and represented a doctrine that stood in opposition to what was professed to be canonical. For these reasons, it should be viewed in terms of a heretical framework.

The pervasiveness of the issue of clerical carnality is readily evident in the sources. Boniface referred to it repeatedly from the time of his earliest missionary work until the end of his life. He fretted over the subject in letters to almost everyone with whom he was in correspondence, including each of the different popes, and abbesses, bishops, and monks in England. In 726, Gregory II responded in a letter to a question Boniface posed about the validity of a baptism performed by adulterous priests. The pontiff also addressed Boniface’s concern about the danger of associating with priests and bishops prone to vices of many sorts, which presumably included carnality.²⁵ He had similar correspondence with the subsequent pope, and in 738, Gregory III wrote a letter to the bishops in Bavaria and Alemannia to announce that Boniface had been commissioned with apostolic authority. Boniface was to help them prohibit and banish not only heathens, but also heretical and adulterous priests.²⁶ The issue was also recurrent in Boniface’s correspondence with Zacharias. In a letter written in 745, the pope reviewed the measures of the recent synod held by Boniface in collaboration with Pippin III and Carloman. One case that Zacharias specifically addressed involved a “false” bishop. This man’s father was “an adulterate and homicidal clerk,” who not only lived in similar fashion, but also ordained other priests who practiced adultery. Zacharias reminded Boniface that he had already informed him more than once that no murderer or adulterer could perform the sacraments and that the canons forbid the ordination of such men.²⁷

Boniface clearly found it difficult to avoid contact with those whom he considered “false priests.” In a letter to Abbess Eadburga of Thanet,

²⁴ Boniface, *Letters*, 50.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 26.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 44.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 60.

written sometime between 742 and 746, he declared that the treachery of such men was more difficult to bear than that of the pagans.²⁸ He also frequently expressed his fear that association with these “false” brethren might affect his own salvation. This fear stemmed from an oath he made to Gregory II in 722. In the written oath, Boniface pledged his loyalty to the pope, and that he would uphold the unity of the church and its doctrines. He also promised to refrain from any interactions with bishops who were “opponents of the ancient institutions of the holy Fathers,” except to try to restrain or convert them. The next part of the oath is significant, for it attached Boniface’s own salvation to his adherence to this pledge. He swore that if he were to act contrary to this promise, he would “be found guilty at the last judgment and suffer the punishment of Ananias and Sapphira.”²⁹ He recalled this oath throughout his correspondence and sought validation that he had done his best to uphold it. For example, he referred to this pledge in a letter to Zacharias in 751, just a few years before his death, and over thirty years after having made it. He explained that he tried to avoid contact with false priests, but his work within the Frankish church and the dealings with the court made it impossible. Zacharias assured him that so long as his contact did not involve consenting to their sinfulness or infecting his own soul, then God would not reproach him.³⁰ In response to a similar inquiry, Bishop Daniel of Winchester provided support through the authority of Paul, Saint Augustine, and Jerome. Daniel explained that good and evil would be mixed until the judgment, and that the virtuous could not be harmed by the wicked. He assured Boniface that suffering in this way was a form of service which would be rewarded, since in order to help sinners it was necessary to interact with them.³¹

In summary, the issue of adulterous or false priests posed a significant problem to Boniface. Yet, even if a level of pervasiveness can be assumed to be true based on Boniface’s preoccupation with it, this does not necessarily support the argument that it should be considered heretical in nature. It certainly indicates that the Frankish clergy had fallen into rampant sinfulness, but in order to fit it into a larger framework, it is necessary to demonstrate that there was a degree of resistance to reform based on doctrinal opposition. And so it is to this point that we must now turn.

One of the factors that troubled Boniface concerning the carnality of the clergy was the consistent denial that these actions were wrong. It was

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 65.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 86–87.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 64.

a source of great anxiety to him that these representatives of the church insisted that they could not only continue with their adulterous ways, but also that they could also continue to act as deacons, priests, and bishops. Upon the pope's succession, Boniface wrote a letter to Zacharias complaining about the priests who lived with several concubines yet still claimed to have the right both to perform the duties of priests—including celebrating Mass—and to advance to the office of bishop. He went on to say that certain bishops and priests, who were known to be “adulterers and fornicators of the worst kind,” and who had had children born after they were ordained, returned from Rome claiming that they had permission to continue their service in the Church. Boniface was appalled by this claim, for it would mean that Rome acted in opposition to canonical decrees.³² In a letter to Bishop Daniel of Winchester, he expressed his outrage over the fact that not only did certain adulterous priests persist in their lustful behavior, but that they also claimed they could still fulfill their duties to the Church. Boniface considered this aspect of their actions “most harmful to the people.”³³ Adulterous bishops were also maintaining their opposition to the claims against them by ordaining new priests who were, in turn, involved in carnality.³⁴

Although this promiscuity outraged Boniface, clerical celibacy was not, in fact, universally mandated until early in the twelfth century. The First Lateran Council, held in 1123, invalidated all marriages previously held by the clergy and consequently made celibacy an obligation. The Second Lateran Council, held in 1139, declared that no one who was married could be ordained.³⁵ Until this legislation was passed, there were rulings concerning clerical marriage, which regulated such things as the living arrangements of married priests and their wives. These, however, were done locally. There was a convention that drew on Roman, Greek, and Jewish traditions, which held that a priest who had had sex with his wife could not perform sacred duties because he was physically unclean. As the Eucharist became more centrally important, it was understood that abstinence should be observed before performing the sacrament.

Tertullian, writing in the second and third centuries, was the first to advocate clerical celibacy and many after him enthusiastically embraced this policy. The desert ascetics and the publication of Athanasius of Alexandria's *Life of Anthony* helped to popularize the idea, and in the

³² *Ibid.*, 50

³³ *Ibid.*, 63.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 60.

³⁵ Charles A. Frazee, “The Origins of Clerical Celibacy in the Western Church,” *Church History* 41, no. 2 (June 1972): 149–167; *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Celibacy, Canon Law of” and “Celibacy, History of.”

fourth and fifth centuries, the Church Fathers continued to develop the notion that sexual intercourse defiled the clergy and made them unworthy of ministry. Yet, there was still much opposition against efforts to pass legislation that would universally control clerical sexual activity. For example, at the Council of Nicaea in 325, proponents of celibacy tried to pass a measure similar to that which had previously become law in Elvira, Spain. The ruling, which would have forbidden priests to have sex with their wives or have kids by them, failed to become law. However, it was agreed that priests should not marry after their ordination, and regulations were made concerning which women could live within the households of the clergy. Similar measures were passed elsewhere, and it became a customary, although unwritten, law that clerics of a certain level should not be married and that no one should get married after their ordination, nor be married more than once. Celibacy was encouraged by the papacy, starting with Damasus I at the end of the fourth century, because sex was deemed incompatible with the Christian ministry. In the fifth century, popes such as Innocent I and Leo I expanded this view through their letters. A century later, Pelagius II and Gregory the Great, as the first monks in the papacy, advocated monastic ideals and confirmed mandatory celibacy in Rome.

Boniface was undoubtedly influenced by the teachings of Gregory the Great and saw him as a source of authority. In his letter to Archbishop Nothelm of Canterbury, he requested a copy of the letter written by Augustine to Gregory I, in which the missionary asked the pontiff several questions, particularly concerning marriage.³⁶ In another letter written to King Ethelbald of Mercia in 746–747, he recalled that it was Gregory who sent the missionaries to convert England.³⁷ Around the same time, he sent copies of some of Gregory's letters, which he had received from the church archives in Rome, to Archbishop Egbert of York.³⁸ There are other examples in his correspondence in which Boniface was either requesting or being sent copies of Gregory's letters. He undoubtedly was aware, therefore, of Gregory's stance on clerical celibacy, and drew on it to develop his own position. Furthermore, Boniface relied on the authority of canon law, through which much legislation had been enacted concerning clerical abstinence and Rome, which as we have seen, supported clerical celibacy starting in the fourth century. He also drew on the teachings of the early fathers. Finally, Willibald tells us that Boniface entered the monastery, by his own request, when he was only seven years old, and that as he got older he was able to remain abstinent

³⁶ Boniface, *Letters*, 33.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 73.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 75.

through continual study.³⁹ Clearly, for Boniface, celibacy was the ideal state for the clergy.

Although it is reasonable to assume that Boniface supported the Roman directive for clerical celibacy, his preoccupation was not merely over the failure to uphold this mandate. In many instances, the bishops and clerics were accused of debauchery and having several concubines. He was effectively accusing the clergy in Frankia of Nicolaitism. Nicolaitism was an early Christian sect about which very little is actually known. The sect was believed to have been started by Nicolas of Antioch, who was a deacon appointed by the apostles in Jerusalem, but who quickly fell into apostasy. Eusebius mentions him in *The Ecclesiastical History*, and gives Clement of Alexandria's account of Nicolas. Clement recounted the story of the deacon who gave his wife to the members of the sect, and that all fell into promiscuity. Clement denied that Nicolas had relations with any woman other than his wife and indeed, it is debated whether or not Nicolas himself fell into sexual immorality.⁴⁰ The term Nicolaitism, however, became associated with sexual depravity, and this association continued, although the sect itself did not exist after the second century. Alberto Ferreiro argues that by the end of the second century, it had become a topos used to condemn any heretical movement of sexual immorality. He also describes the manner in which Jerome used typology to connect Priscillian to Nicolas of Antioch, although Ferreiro denies that Jerome knew Priscillian directly enough to make such an assessment accurately.⁴¹

The term Nicolaitism continued to be used to denote sexual immorality, and soon it was applied within the context of clerical celibacy. In 557, it was decided at the Council of Tours that all married clerics who did not adhere to the church legislation passed throughout the sixth century—which provided strict guidelines for separate living quarters for the couples so as to ensure that clerics would not have sexual relations with their wives—would be charged with the heresy of Nicolaitism.⁴² Similarly, the eleventh-century reformer Humbert of Silva accused all married priests of the heresy; incidentally, he also argued that simony was a heresy. Humbert was brought to Rome along with Hildebrand, who would become Gregory VII, as an advisor to Nicolas II. Gregory VII, of course, made great efforts to effect clerical celibacy, and after his

³⁹ Willibald, *Life of Saint Boniface*, 1–2.

⁴⁰ Eusebius, *The Ecclesiastical History*, trans. G. A. Williamson (London: Penguin Books, 1989), 3.29.

⁴¹ Alberto Ferreiro, "Priscillian and Nicolaitism," *Church History* 52, no. 4 (Nov. 1998): 382–392.

⁴² *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Celibacy, History of."

death, reformers continued with his enthusiasm. The Council of Clermont, held in 1095, discussed married clergy in terms of Nicolaitism. The first canon of this council declared that no member of the clergy should be married, and if any who were married performed Mass, they would be condemned until Christ's return.⁴³

In this context, the activities of which the priests in eighth-century Frankia were accused can certainly be considered heretical. The term itself was not used, but the outrage expressed indicates that they were viewed as such. Zacharias wondered how they could still consider themselves priests, and insisted that Boniface forbid them to perform their clerical duties.⁴⁴ Boniface too, was so appalled by the behavior that he witnessed, he feared it invalidated not only their ability to act as members of the clergy, but also the sacraments they had already performed. He was particularly concerned with whether or not the baptisms executed by these false priests were legitimate. In response to questions posed by Boniface in a nonextant letter, Gregory II assured him that baptisms performed by adulterous or otherwise unworthy priests were valid so long as they were performed in the name of the Trinity. Gregory II insisted that they must not be baptized again. This is the first indication that Boniface's own beliefs verged on Donatism.⁴⁵ His correspondence reveals several instances in which he inquired whether it was necessary to rebaptize someone due to the state of the priest performing the sacrament. These queries were not limited to the issue of adulterous priests, and in fact reveal a rather interesting inclination in the saint toward heresy. At one point he was actually reprimanded by Zacharias for administering second baptisms to Christians who had originally received the sacrament by a priest who did not understand Latin and therefore misspoke the words invoking the Trinity. The pope reproved Boniface, warning him to no longer give such instruction and instead to follow the teaching of the holy fathers. Zacharias also reminded Boniface that, even if a heretic had performed the baptism, it would have been valid if it had been done in the name of the Trinity.⁴⁶ Boniface had trouble accepting this point, as the number of times he inquired about it demonstrates.⁴⁷

⁴³ Frazee, 163–166.

⁴⁴ Boniface, *Letters*, 51.

⁴⁵ Donatism was a schism that began in the fourth century in the context of the persecution of Christians by Diocletian. These rigorists believed that only those who maintained their faith could administer the sacraments, and that those baptized by a *traditor*, or person who surrendered under persecution, must be baptized again. This view was condemned, however, and was accompanied by a strong policy against rebaptism.

⁴⁶ Boniface, *Letters*, 68.

⁴⁷ For some examples see: *ibid.*, 26, 28, 60, 68, 80.

Although Boniface was consistently told that baptisms by fornicators and other false priests would be deemed authentic, the priests themselves were not to be allowed to continue in their clerical functions. Even after doing penance, they were forbidden from the ministry. Yet, this did not mean they were not found in clerical offices; often such priests would resume their positions, and if questioned, they might claim to have received absolution from Rome. In other cases, they actually were restored to their status by Frankish ecclesiastical authorities. Boniface was troubled by one such case late in his ministry. He sought advice from Archbishop Egbert of York concerning a priest who had fallen into carnal sin, but was restored to his office after having done penance. He was celebrating Mass and administering baptisms. Boniface knew that he should be removed according to “the approved canons.” However, there were so few priests, that he feared it might be worse for the people to die as pagans. Furthermore, he was greatly concerned that the replacement he found would have been guilty of the same sin.⁴⁸

In conclusion, Boniface was faced with several heretical movements. He had to deal with named heretics, of which only two were discussed here, who clearly and persistently asserted beliefs that fell outside of church doctrine. Boniface was further troubled by priests, bishops, and deacons who willfully adhered to their heretical, Nicolaitist conduct. In addition, Boniface himself might have been accused of Donatism if he had more adamantly insisted that the baptisms performed by these heretics were invalid. Although Russell may be correct in asserting that there was no clear orthodox authority in this period, it certainly was developing. The dogged opposition that Boniface faced forced him to clarify doctrines and sources of authority with Rome and the ecclesiastical leadership in England. And so, like the heresies which began to surface in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the heretical movements in Boniface’s time helped to shape which sources of authority would be considered valid and the doctrines that would be supported. This is just a peripheral look at the issue of heresy in the eighth century, but it certainly points to the need for more scholarship that reaches beyond the geographical and temporal restraints of this examination.

Rebecca A. Devlin received her Bachelor of Science in Advertising from Syracuse University with a minor in Spanish. After several years of teaching and pursuing her passion for filmmaking, Rebecca began to study history, first at City College of San Francisco and then at San Francisco State University, where she earned a Master of Arts. Her focus is religious history, with an emphasis on Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 91.