



ETHICS IN CONVERSATION

JULY 2022 | 26.6

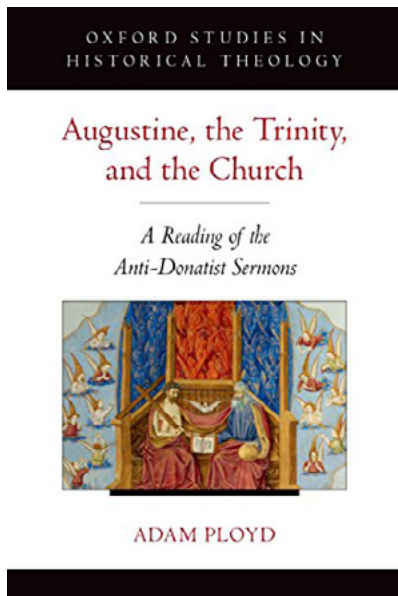
Augustine, the Trinity, and the Church: A Reading of the Anti-Donatist Sermons

Adam Ployd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015)

REVIEWED BY MATTHEW WILEY

The myriad aspects of Augustine's thought give rise to many ways of reading him. Some try to account for the massive scope of his work by providing a taxonomy of his writings, categorizing them as philosophical, exegetical, theological, political, and so on. The problem is that it is not always so neat. Sometimes the borders are not so easy to define. This is especially the case when it comes to Augustine's sermons, which are always spilling out beyond the genres in which we try to contain them.

In his 2015 volume, *Augustine, The Trinity, and the Church*, Adam Ployd offers a reading of Augustine's sermons that tries to honour their nuance, complexity, and abundance. Specifically, Ployd examines Augustine's



anti-Donatist sermons, preached from December of 406 to mid-summer of 407. The book is a revision of Ployd's doctoral dissertation under the direction of Lewis Ayres, and as such it belongs to the "New Canon" of Augustinian scholarship. In my view, it models many of the strengths of such an approach.

Augustine's life was marked by controversy. Contending for the truthfulness of the Christian faith, he writes against the Manichees, the Pelagians, and the Donatists. However, Ployd notes, "the bishop of Hippo was not merely a polemical or occasional theologian ... he was, most often, a preacher" (1). Ployd's book is about the sermons Augustine was preaching against the Donatists, and it is rooted in the conviction that it is in these sermons that "we can most easily apprehend the ways in which seemingly distinct theological questions are mutually informing for Augustine" (1).



Our holy father Augustine by Lawrence OP is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0



Giovanni Lanfranco, *St. Augustine and the Mystery of the Trinity*



Titian, *St. Augustine*

The book has four chapters. The first tries to show how and why Augustine unites a pro-Nicene understanding of the Trinity with his anti-Donatist ecclesiology, specifically noting how “Augustine’s preaching on the Trinity and the church in these sermons converges in a common moral epistemology” (19). Moral epistemology, for Ployd, refers to Augustine’s account of “how we advance in knowledge of God through the reformation of our desire” (19). The primary goal of Augustine’s preaching was the training of souls through the cultivation of knowledge and love. Because of this goal, Augustine’s sermons at times seem more integrative than his theological treatises, which tend to be more discrete. Therefore, the Trinity and the church intersect in these anti-Donatist sermons in ways that should inform our understanding of his Trinitarian theology and ecclesiology more broadly. For Ployd, “Augustine’s approach to both the Trinity and the church entails a common moral epistemology that turns upon the distinction between the material and the spiritual” (42). This distinction, which cuts right to the heart of the Donatist controversy, is indeed something that runs through the whole of Augustine’s thought—forming, if you will, a sort of tensile dialectic.

Chapters two, three, and four go on to more fully demonstrate “the degree to which trinitarian dynamics shape Augustine’s anti-Donatist ecclesiology” (56). It is not just that there is a strong relationship between the Trinity and the church, nor is it merely that these doctrines share a common moral epistemology. Rather, what Ployd is

arguing is that the reformation of our hearts and minds, for Augustine, comes about through the work of God in the body of Christ (chapter two), through the love of the Holy Spirit (chapter three), by the sanctifying work of baptism (chapter four). All of this is surrounded by grace: “The church’s identity and integrity are expressions of the life and work of the Trinity” (56).

Chapter two has a masterful section on Augustine’s prosopological exegesis. Setting it in the context of fourth-century hermeneutical practices more broadly, Ployd shows how Augustine’s prosopological exegesis of the Psalms informs his understanding of the *totus Christus*—that “Augustine maintains the singular grammatical subject of Christ and finds a way to speak of humanity’s inclusion in the predication of that subject” (71). This kind of reading is used by Augustine against the Donatists, who, by forsaking the unity of the church, “forsake the vision of God that comes only through participation in Christ’s body” (74). Through his reading of Acts 9:4, Augustine explains how our faith differs from

that of the apostles: “The apostles saw Christ in the flesh, but they did not see the church. We, on the other hand, see the church but not the incarnate Christ. For both the Apostles and later Christians, that which is visible leads to faith in the invisible” (93). Here, we are back to the dialectic between the material and the spiritual. It is not as if the two are opposed, however—there is an “organic unity” such that the one body is present in heaven and on earth “because of its union with



Meister Bertram von Minden, *Apocalypse Triptych: Seven Churches*

Christ” (96). This unity should lead us to humility, as our glory is not our own, and as we bear the sins of others in this very union.

Chapter three takes a pneumatological turn to flesh out the ecclesiological implications of such an understanding “by identifying the source of that body’s unity” (101). Ployd explicates Augustine’s belief that love redirects our desires away from the material and toward the spiritual—ultimately, to God himself. He also notes, however, that Augustine thinks love “establishes an ordered unity within the created world, especially within the church” (101). Because the Donatists deny this second work of love, they cut themselves off from the possibility of the first. Their refusal to be bound in love to the body of Christ prohibits them from reordering their desires toward the love of God. This, too, is grounded in pro-Nicene theology for Augustine. Love is “the agent of unity in both the Trinity and the church” (102). And in fact, Augustine identifies the Holy Spirit himself as “that love which brings about in the life of the church what he eternally is in the perfect union of the Trinity” (102). The unity we seek after in the church is not brought about by human effort. It is a work of the Spirit, a gift of grace. And because of this, it does not matter “if not everyone in the church achieves this perfect love because there exists a hem of Christians who do have Christ’s charity, securing the integrity of the whole church” (121). This faithful remnant, by way of the *totus Christus* doctrine, testifies against the Donatist sect. The Spirit’s eternal identity unites with his redemptive work—“he gives to us what he is” (142).



John Salmon, Mural at St Michael and All Angels, London, is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0

(144). Ployd argues that Augustine “redefines baptism through a pro-Nicene understanding of the common and inseparable operations of the triune persons”

(145). Augustine preaches two whole sermons on one verse, John 1:33: “I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit’” (NRSV). It is precisely because Christ is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit that Augustine can depict the church as “a communion that transcends historical particularity because Christ’s gift of the Holy Spirit is not a past event but the continually repeated operation of the triune God” (146). Here, too, we can see how Augustine’s pro-Nicene theology is used in his anti-Donatist ecclesiology. For the Donatists, Christ’s gift of the Spirit to the apostles is something that must be preserved as a concrete historical reality. However, Augustine reasons from the logic of inseparable operations as depicted in John 1 to conclude that the triune God continually works to give the Spirit—an eschatological gift more than one bound in history: “The gift of the Spirit is an eternal operation of Christ the Son, who gives the Spirit in every baptism” (148). This eternal and divine act is not contingent upon the concrete historical church. Rather than understanding the unity of the church as “an insularity that protects the purity of the baptismal font,” Augustine argues that the work of the Holy Spirit establishes a church by “teaching its true members to moan for a simplicity that mirrors the unity of the one divine name in which they are baptized” (184–85).

The strengths of Ployd’s book are many. It is not overly long, and it is written in clear prose which guides the reader from chapter to chapter as he slowly builds his argument. Even more, the book serves as an excellent example of

how to read Augustine in a way that is at once specific and comprehensive. Though Ployd offers a reading of anti-Donatist sermons that were only preached during one year of Augustine’s life, he does so in a way that demonstrates how the whole of Augustine’s thought is at play in these sermons. Indeed, the book implicitly serves to advance the cause of “New Canon” Augustinian scholarship by showing that Augustine’s sermons are



Pentecost from the Bamberg Apocalypse

integrative pieces of writing which bring together the full range of his intellectual powers. For these reasons and others, the book succeeds in defending its thesis, showing just how it is that Augustine's pro-Nicene theology contributes to his anti-Donatist ecclesiology.

There is one part of the book that strikes me as a weakness, though perhaps, at its core, it is just a desire for Ployd to say more. It comes in the preface to the book, where Ployd admits that though the argument is indeed a historical one, it would be dishonest of him to pretend that his interest "is merely historical or only academic" (vii). There is something about Augustine's vision of church unity which he finds "deeply compelling" (vii). And he insists that this is the case "even if I am not planning on swimming the Tiber anytime soon" (vii). This concession, though it is slight and easy to miss because it comes in the preface, reveals to me a faulty and unfortunate understanding of Augustine's ecclesiology—namely, that it really belongs to Rome.

Ployd, himself a United Methodist, is familiar with ecclesial division, as all Protestants in the twenty-first century North American landscape are. Ours is an age of denominational splits. The last century has seen an exponential increase in such fractures, as we've moved from 2,500 global denominations in 1900 to nearly 45,000 denominations today. What are we to say about such division? How in any meaningful sense can we confess that the church is one? It seems to me that Augustine could be a great help here. And I think Ployd would agree, yet he seems to imply that to follow Augustine's ecclesiology is to be on the way to Rome.

This is where I voice my resistance. The kind of ecclesiological thinking that Augustine undertakes is precisely the kind we Protestants need to recover. It is thoroughly theological. It is forged in the face of controversy. It is rooted in a canonical reading of Scripture. Warfield may have quipped that the Reformation was Augustine's soteriology winning out over his ecclesiology, but I am not convinced. Can we not also follow

Augustine's thinking about the church? As an appeal to unity, his anti-Donatist sermons could prove to be remarkably instructive for us today, finding ourselves as we do in a divided church. And like Augustine, perhaps we too would learn once again to place our hope squarely in gracious love of the triune God. He will find us out at sea, drifting away on our splinters of wood, and in grace he will restore us to the one Ark of Christ. As we long for our unity to become more visible—looking for the Spirit's liberation from our legions of division—Ployd's book bears witness, here and in the meantime, that we are bound together in Christ's grace.



St Augustine by Lawrence OP is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Matthew Wiley is a PhD student in systematic theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, where he also serves as the managing director of the Henry Center for Theological Understanding. He is an Associate Fellow of the Kirby Laing Centre for Public Theology.