

For some of you, this course must seem to be in free-fall ever since the evangelical high point of Augustine’s conversion in *Confessions* 8. In chapter 9, he’s too excited about baptism and too conflicted over his mother. In chapter 10, he tears up the Hollywood ending we’re begging for. Then come the Donatists, and our hero is suddenly the official theologian of the Spanish Inquisition. We find him approving the forced “conversion” of Donatists – and calling it “toleration” (Ferguson 274)!

Let’s turn lemons into lemonade, and consider several ways Augustine’s responses to the Donatist schism have affected subsequent Christian history:

1. The imperial classification of Donatism as a heresy brought the movement into the crosshairs of **Constantinianism**. Here is an early glimpse of a theological development that would have been unforeseeable just a hundred years earlier. Then, the empire was the Church’s enemy, or else its rival; now it is its handmaiden (or is it the other way around?).

Brown notes the Church’s widespread excitement at the new era that had been dawning for decades. As a man committed to reading God’s intentions in the course of history, Augustine cannot help but see the Empire’s change of heart as a portentous and providential event. The God who is behind everything must be behind this too. Legacy number 1 is a giant step in Rome’s transformation from the beast of Revelation to the Holy Empire of the Middle Ages.

Looking through the hindsight of the centuries of “Christendom” that followed, we might want to be more dubious, and blame Augustine for not being more discerning. Yet *City of God* will show that Augustine interprets the events of Constantinianism rather soberly, compared to some contemporaries. Besides, today many evangelicals Christians support “their” president’s proposal for federal funding of “faith based organizations.” Some see this development as divinely directed, and others see it as a Trojan horse. Before we pass judgment on Augustine’s prophetic vision, we might ask whether we would have seen things so differently in his day.

Yet I still wonder: What if Augustine had been able to see Donatism’s appeal to imperial coercion of the Maximianists as a ‘mirror,’ not of a weakness to be exploited, but of an unhealthy and desperate ecclesiology that needed healing? Wasn’t there another way?

2. Augustine’s interpretation of baptism deeply complicated and obscured the old **symbolism of sacraments**. His distinction between sacramental validity and sacramental fruitfulness causes disbelief and head-scratching when I try to explain churches’ baptismal policies to students and churchgoers. In the New Testament, baptism is so straightforward! Jesus’ experience at the Jordan becomes the experience of all with whom he shares it. Baptism initiates believers into the community of Jesus – visibly, communally, charismatically. The bath enacts the judgment and salvation of Noah’s flood, the death of the old person and the birth, by water and the Spirit, of a new one in Christ. Simple.

The symbolism is already breaking down before Augustine (People putting off baptism until the last moment? Infants receiving it? Social converts whose pagan ways hardly change?). Augustine’s baptismal theology further weakens it. The baptizing community may no longer be a place of salvation; the initiate’s rebirth may no longer bring him or her into eternal life.

The sacraments are given a validity of their own outside the framework of the Church’s actual life, and they are depersonalized. Instead of being essentially means of grace, in the sense of channels of God’s gracious approach to man, they come to be thought of mechanically and impersonally. A means of personal graciousness cannot be ‘valid’ in the sense of being the genuine article, and yet not ‘efficacious’; Augustine’s idea of baptism is closer to the notion of a cheque which can be stopped until, in different circumstances, the drawer chooses to unstop it” (G.W. Lampe, in Cunliffe-Jones, ed., *A History of Christian Doctrine*, 176).

This could have been avoided if Augustine had recognized the Donatist communities as legitimate though sinning churches – as contexts of sacramental *fruitfulness* rather than mere validity, in spite of their church-denying and church-dividing. But such a move was unthinkable, and for good reason (it has taken several hundred years of Catholic-Protestant schism just to make the idea plausible to us). Augustine reached the next best conclusion.

The consequences of that conclusion, a thousand years later, are Catholic sacramental practices that are deeply individualistic, and whose interpretation borders on the magical. Protestants will reject the world that *ex opere operato* has helped create, whether or not they reject the doctrine itself. That's legacy number 2.

Let's call legacy number 3 "**catholic imperialism.**" By this I mean Rome's "eminent domain" to claim the (ineffective) baptisms of other communities as Catholic. This is a lasting feature of Catholic ecclesiology, which at its most charitable still regards the Catholic communion as the only true Church, and Protestant bodies "separated brethren": brethren because of their catholic baptisms, separated because of their schismatic heresies. Last fall a reaffirmation of Roman supremacy, *Dominus Iesus*, made the same point.

Feeling smug, are we? Well, not only Catholics can be catholic imperialists. By the same principle, Protestants appreciate Catholic communities as true churches, insofar as they appropriately practice the Word. Because Jesus' presence and the Spirit's work do not respect denominational boundaries, but freely issue wherever the Word comes in power and Spirit and conviction, we Protestants can claim that salvation Protestant-style is happening even outside Protestantism, *ex opere operato*.

So the doctrine that seems to preserve the Church in spite of its failings, turns out to be a paradigm for failure in ecumenical reconciliation, and a handy excuse for not doing anything about those failings. (I'm not claiming that there is a better way; I'm just listing legacies.)

Legacy number 4 is a hardening during these years of Augustine's doctrines of **sin and grace**. Augustine is always hungry for greater moral rigor, constantly pursuing the mastery of his sinful passions. And he is always ruthless in suppressing any movement that claims human beings can or must achieve that mastery on their own: Manichaeism, Neoplatonism, Donatism, Pelagianism. Could it be that Augustine sees a common thread of pride running through all these? Does that explain, and even justify, the vehemence of his responses?

We might sum all these legacies up in a final one: the strengthening of **discipline** as a regular church practice. Augustine's alternative to the Donatist or Pelagian views of grace is an entire lifestyle of admonition, penitence, and reconciliation – not only for converted Donatists, but for all Christians, who continue to sin against their baptisms. Our sinful habits are so ingrained that we need countervailing habits of virtue to train us in righteousness. Scripture is one such means of training, as Augustine has already found out in Milan's church and garden (Ferguson 273). But it is also the sacramental practice of *penance* that really comes into its own under the weight of Augustine's influence. Augustine "spoke of a *disciplina Dei* or *Domini* to which corresponds a *correctio Domini*; it is a sign of his mercy because a person, within the time of his earthly existence, still has the possibility of reform" (Ferguson 242). Irish monasticism will develop the sacrament of penance into the form so popular in Catholic practice, and so abhorrent to many Protestants. That practice turns out to be Augustinian to its core!

The next item on Augustine's literary agenda is an exploration of the role not penance, but Scripture, plays in the Christian life. Sunnier skies ahead, folks! Buy your books quick before the bookstore returns them!