

Well! The extraordinary *City of God* ends happily ever after, the lights come up, and we walk back to the car, suddenly re-entering the real world we had never really left. And we gradually (and unhappily) re-adjust to the noise, the traffic, the everyday details of life.

Brown’s timeline resumes with the Council of Carthage in 411 (remember, Alaric sacked Rome in 410). Here Catholics and Donatists debated their cases before imperial authority. They aim, first, to influence imperial policy, and second, to sway the “undecided” middle of public opinion. The tribune’s judgment, virtually assured from the beginning, is for the Catholics: “Donatists were to join the Catholic communion. Those who refused to submit were forbidden to assemble, and their churches were to be turned over to the Catholics. Any who continued to support their Circumcellions would forfeit all their lands” (Ferguson, 219; cf. 7.26). Even Donatist laypeople who will not become Catholic are fined.

Brown notes that this “cementing” of Constantinianism is cold comfort for Augustine. Perhaps because he is fighting Donatism at the same time he is detailing the earthly city’s futility, he has abandoned his earlier optimism about “Christian Rome.” He is aware of the corruption of “Christian” leaders and the lingering injustices of Roman power. The imperial sword, though still useful to do God’s work, is a “greater danger and temptation” than the Church’s earlier disenfranchisement. Yet he remains Constantinian. Abuses of imperial power cannot annul Rome’s providential role in God’s plan.

*On the Correction of the Donatists*, addressed to a Roman tribune, expresses Augustine’s mature stance towards Donatism. It is dated 417 (when books 11-13 of *City of God* are being written). I find it a very impressive little letter. Here are some highlights:

- Donatists recognize the Catholics’ Christ; why then do they ignore his prophecies of a Church going to the ends of the earth (1.3)? Augustine’s ecclesiology claims that:

First, *Church unity is fundamental for Christian faith*. The creeds confess Father, Son, Spirit, and *one holy catholic apostolic Church*. Like his contemporaries (and opponents), Augustine takes this quite seriously. He follows Tyconius’ rule of interpretation that “Christ” sometimes refers to Jesus, sometimes the Church, to claim that Christ justifies (Rom. 3:24) by his body, the Church (9.40). Outside the sacraments of the one Church, there is no redemption.

Second, *purity is eschatological, not historical*. Until the Last Day, the Church is a mixed body, whose people are still liable to sin. Thus the saints pray “forgive us our debts” (9.39). Donatists cannot justify their use of the Lord’s Prayer if they maintain that the Church must be pure *already*. There is an important principle here: Theology follows liturgy.

Third, *unity is historical, not eschatological*. It is concretely and historically embodied in the disciples, apostolic succession, and sacraments, all signs of unity. “There is one body and one Spirit, ... one hope ... one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God” (Eph. 4:4-6).

*If evangelicals believe that the unity of the Church is important, then what is our answer to Augustine’s challenge? If not, then why not?*

- Donatists had appealed to Constantine, who ruled against them. Like Daniel’s accusers, they now face the punishment of the very laws they helped create (Dan. 6:24). But *this* punishment is rehabilitative, not retributive (2.7). Imperial laws may be against the truth of God, and must be disobeyed. But, like Nebuchadnezzar, rulers may turn around and legislate truth (Dan. 3:29), now persecuting justly – that is, *correcting* (2.8-9). Like cholesterol, there are two kinds of persecution, and one is good for us.

For Augustine, such judgment is a sign of God's mercy. Our sinfulness makes us unable and unwilling to pursue goodness and justice. Like fools and lunatics, we do not know what is good for us. So, when persuasion no longer works, God uses corrective force (3.13, 7.26).

Here it is important to appreciate another controversy Augustine is now facing: Pelagius' contention that the unaided will is free to choose the good. Augustine believes the will is debilitated by sin and cannot choose the good, and so needs the healing of "prior grace" to do so (freely or otherwise). God's first grace is liberating, but coercive. In my opinion, even Arminianism does not deny the initially coercive quality of grace. God invades our depraved lives and creates new possibilities. He "violates the prime directive." He changes the course of our lives in violation of our old wills, which could not have wanted the change.

The end result of this uninvited intervention is freely chosen communion with God. Compulsion's beneficiaries come around to appreciate what they could not at the time (3.13, 7.29). Calvinist, Lutheran, Catholic, and Arminian Augustinians all seem to see force at the beginning, freedom at the end. *Is there room within orthodoxy to disagree with Augustine here?*

· Augustine contends that the thrones of Gentiles are means of coercive grace. For support, he cites Ps. 2. The kings of the earth serve the Lord by quashing opposition to his commandments. It was not only the kings of Israel who destroyed idols and commended the worship of Yahweh: Augustine cites Hezekiah and Josiah, *and* Darius, Nebuchadnezzar, and the king of Ninevah (5.19; he might have added Ahasuerus, Esther's husband).

· Yeah, but what about the New Testament? Augustine offers several ingenious answers:

First, Paul holds up Sarah as a mother who persecutes justly (2.11; Gal. 4:30). Not a bad argument! After all, Paul condemns the circumcision party. He does not use force against them, but he hopes for gory, poetic justice (Gal. 5:12). Is this so far from Donatists facing the judgment of a secular rule whose judgment they originally courted?

Second, Jesus persecutes Paul, patterning Augustinian vision of operative grace, then cooperative grace, "first striking, and afterwards consoling" (6.22; cf. Acts 9). (It is no use pleading that Jesus can do what his agents cannot, for his agents share in his work; 1 Cor. 3:9.)

Third is the parable of the wedding banquet. When vacancies remain, the king commands his servants to "compel them to come in" (Luke 14:22-23). The obedient come first, through a gentle call; the disobedient second, through vengeance. The banquet is the Eucharist, the sign of Christ's unity (6.24). The analogy with Donatists' forced reconciliation is striking.

The more satisfying answer is eschatological. In the time of the apostles, Ps. 2 was only *beginning* to be fulfilled. Ps. 72 foresees a later time when "all kings shall fall down before him" (5.20). The kings of Babylon, Ninevah, and Persia are eschatological pointers to a messianic age when the world's rulers participate in God's reign. Augustine has what theologians call an "inaugurated eschatology": He sees the end-times inaugurated in Jesus' coming and progressing in its aftermath. This is paradigmatic for Catholic eschatology, which is sometimes characterized as (or accused of) "historicizing" the eschaton. History is eschatology!

*What do you think of Augustine's arguments on New Testament warrants for coercion?*

If Augustine is to be believed, many Donatists relented without too many long-term effects. These may have been "nominal" Donatists, out of social or familial pressure, and they could just as easily be nominal Catholics when the winds blew that direction. Others came around over time. A few (Circumcellions?) have resorted to violence and terror (7.30). For Augustine, the only comfort in these failures of discipline lies in the mystery of God's predestination (1.2; Brown). Again we see the massive coherence of his theological vision.