

The *SBJT* Forum

Editor's Note: Readers should be aware of the forum's format. Chad Brand, Gregg Allison, Stephen Nichols, and Everett Berry have been asked specific questions to which they have provided written responses. These writers are not responding to one another. The journal's goal for the Forum is to provide significant thinkers' views on topics of interest without requiring lengthy articles from these heavily-committed individuals. Their answers are presented in an order that hopefully makes the forum read as much like a unified presentation as possible.

SBJT: Why should Baptists be interested in the life and thought of Augustine?

Chad Brand: Anyone who knows much about Augustine (A.D. 354-430) might wonder what indeed he has to do with Baptists at all. And we would certainly want to emphasize the contrasts as well as the similarities. The African Father inherited a tradition of ecclesiology from people such as Cyprian upon which he based his work, even further developing that approach, an approach we now associate with Roman Catholicism and its close relatives such as Orthodoxy, and to a lesser extent Anglicanism. He made a case for such practices as universal infant baptism and even a prototypical form of inquisition, both of which are abhorrent to Baptists. Interestingly, though, his final views on baptism stemmed from his evangelicalism, and not merely from liturgical or moralistic notions. And his desire to see imperial forces aid in ending the Donatist system grew from his genuine conviction that the schismatics were damning the souls of their communicants. (By the way, we still reject both practices.) Yet, Augustine has much to contribute to Baptists today. I will note briefly three items for consideration.

First, Augustine may have been the first consistently evangelical theologian since Paul (though Athanasius came

close). The post-NT period was marked by writers whose primary focus was moralism, largely due to defections from the church caused by persecution. Though they may have experienced grace, these thinkers tended not to say much about it. Athanasius addressed this problem to a degree in his Trinitarian treatment of salvation by noting that God must be law-giver, law-keeper, and law-enabler. But he still fell short of explicating the genuine evangel. But by 396 in his work addressed to Simplicianus, Augustine is noting that the problem is sin and the solution is God's grace extended freely through the cross. That notion was expanded in his *Confessions* (ca. 400), and developed fully in his anti-Pelagian works (ca. 412-421). Though he never fully rejected the tradition that grace comes through the church, in these writings he explicates the notion, seemingly to us to contradict the Cyprianic understanding, that grace comes immediately to the soul through Christ by faith. In later years Augustine wrote his *Retractions*, a volume in which he specified all the ways he had changed his mind on various issues. One wonders whether, had he lived longer, he might have eventually rejected the Cyprianic understanding of grace extended through the church and adopted a more Lutheran or Calvinian way of articulating the con-

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nection between soteriology and ecclesiology. I guess we will never know. As it stands, Augustine is the truly Catholic/Protestant church father of the patristic period.

Second, Augustine developed a philosophy of history that included a serious attempt to analyze the role of the church within the *polis* (society). This was spelled out especially in his magisterial work, *City of God* (ca. 413-426). The book is divided into two parts. The first part is an attempt to show how and why Rome had fallen into decay and weakness. He demonstrates that at one time men of stoic character and high-mindedness led Rome. Families were large and strong, and Rome's governors were, generally, men of noble character. The Empire's founders had virtually created civil law and encouraged justice and equity. Yet, at its heart there lay the seeds of its own destruction, seeds in the form of the ancient Roman religion. That religion was replete with encouragements to immorality and decadence. Eventually, many Romans rejected the facticity of their mythology, but were still moved by, and eventually dominated by, its moral decadence, a decadence which came to characterize the lives of many of its key leaders. Anticipating many of Edward Gibbon's later observations, Augustine blamed the impending fall of the Empire to the German hordes on its ethical debasement, and not, as many Romans were doing, on the flourishing Christian church.

In the second part of the volume, the African Father explained that history was the working out of two rival societies or cities. Since the rebellion of Satan and his minions, there had been two kingdoms in the world—the city of God and the city of man. The earthly city is marked by love

of self and contempt for God, and the heavenly city is marked by love for God even to the point of contempt for self. On the one hand we have Babylon and Rome, while on the other hand stands Jerusalem. And one day the city of God will overtake the city of man once and for all.

The devil, they say, is in the details (or the decal). This model eventually became the architectural design for the Holy Roman Empire. Charlemagne loved to have this book read to him in the evenings by the fireside as he plotted his next campaign against Swedish barbarians or Iberian bandits, thus extending the “city of God” further over the godless in his day. This intersection of church and state is antithetical to our Baptist convictions about voluntarism and soul accountability, but that ought not to turn us away from Augustine's main thrust. In our day it is clear that he was right in his basic thesis. A new barbarism has emerged right under our noses in the forms of the new sexuality, violent terrorism, and resurgent atheism, making it clear that the city of God has not yet overcome the city of man.

Finally, there is much that we can learn from Augustine's best-known work, *Confessions*. We Baptists are big on testimonies of salvation, and this is one of the first great testimony stories in the history of the church. In fact, one recent translation titles the book, *Testimonies*. The first autobiography handed down to us, the first work of religious psychology, the first novel (though a true one, contrary to some critics), this volume is a real must-read for every pastor, indeed every serious Christian, and especially Baptists, who love a good story of lost sinners who have come to the end of their rope and have been seized by grace. This little volume stands

beside John Bunyan's *Grace Abounding*, next to C. S. Lewis's *Surprised by Joy*, alongside Nicky Cruz's *Run Baby Run* (and this is probably the first time Augustine and Nicky Cruz have appeared in print in the same sentence) as powerful stories of salvation for desperate sinners.

Augustine. Not exactly from Gulf Shores or Valley Forge. But still an important read for Baptists in our day.

SBJT: Today, in light of some of the hermeneutical trends within postmodernism, there has been a sustained attack upon the clarity of Scripture. What did the early church teach, and what can we learn from them in regard to this important issue?

Gregg Allison: The doctrine of Scripture is one area about which we can learn from the early church. In particular, the church fathers articulated and defended the clarity of Scripture while also taking note of its obscurity in parts. This was in keeping with the Old and New Testaments themselves, which are characterized by the presumption of continued intelligibility.

The patristic writings are full of quotations and allusions to both the Old and New Testaments, appeals based on the conviction that the Bible is understandable. For example, Clement of Rome called his readers' attention to Moses' intercession on behalf of the Israelites (Exodus 32). Clement introduced his discussion simply: "You know the sacred Scriptures, my friends. You know them well, and you have studied the divine words. Therefore I write to remind you" (*First Letter to the Corinthians*, 53). Clement assumed that his readers would understand the biblical narrative because it was clear. Clarity of the New Testament was assumed as well, as Polycarp indicated in an address to the

Philippians: "I have no doubt that you are well versed in sacred Scripture and that it holds no secrets for you." He then proceeded to quote Eph 4:26, encouraging his readers to follow this clear instruction (*Letter to the Philippians*, 12).

Some of the early church fathers addressed this issue directly. Irenaeus, for example, encouraged believers to meditate upon the truths that God has revealed to humanity: "These things fall under our observation and are clearly and unambiguously in plain terms set forth in the Sacred Scriptures.... The entire Scriptures—the prophets and the Gospels—can be clearly, unambiguously, and harmoniously understood by all, although all do not believe them" (*Against Heresies*, 2.27.1-2). In accordance with 2 Pet 3:15-16, Tertullian acknowledged that certain parts of Scripture are hard to understand and so formulated this principle: "Because some passages are more obscure than others, it is right that uncertain statements should be determined by certain ones, and obscure ones by statements that are clear and plain." (*On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, 21). By this method the meaning of even the difficult portions of Scripture could be brought forth.

With Clement of Alexandria (A.D. 150-215) came an emphasis on the mysteries and enigmatic nature of all of Scripture, probably due to the influence of some aspects of Gnosticism on his thinking. For him, any and all truth about God is inexpressible; thus, he wrote of "the impossibility of expressing God: What is divine is unspeakable by human power" (*Stromata*, 5.12). God alone can communicate truth about himself, and this can only be conveyed "in enigmas and symbols, in allegories and metaphors, and in similar figures" (*Stromata*, 5.21.4).

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Thus, Scripture is thoroughly like a parable (see for e.g. *Stromata* 6.15). Because the divine mysteries are expressed in parables, they cannot be understood by everyone. Indeed, for Clement, spiritual believers can grasp biblical mysteries, but not common Christians (see *Stromata* 6.15). Thus, a two-tiered system of Christians was erected, with spiritual believers being able to understand the mysteries of Scripture that simple believers could not appreciate.

Clement's emphasis on a mysterious meaning of Scripture was developed by Origen (A.D. 185-254). On the one hand, Origen held that the Bible is clear for all believers whenever it addresses crucial truths. These he listed as God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, the eternal destiny of people, angels, the creation of the world, and Scripture. In regard to these, Origen believed "that the holy apostles, in preaching the Christian faith, expressed themselves with the utmost clearness on certain points that they believed to be necessary for everyone, even to those who seem somewhat dull in the study of divine knowledge" (*First Principles*, preface 3). He also emphasized the plain language of Scripture that anyone could understand (see for e.g. *Commentary on John* 1.6; *Against Celsus* 3.20; 6.5). On the other hand, he believed that Scripture contains much mystery—spiritual truth hidden under its words—that can only be understood by those "who, by means of the Holy Spirit himself, should obtain the word of wisdom and knowledge" (*First Principles*, preface 3). Specifically, Origen found three levels of meaning in Scripture, corresponding to what he believed were the three parts of human beings, namely body, soul, and spirit. These three senses—the body, the soul,

and the spirit of Scripture—are understood by Christians according to their progress in the faith. As a result, everyone receives benefit from Scripture, but only mature believers can understand its deeper, divine sense. Thus, the multi-tiered system of Christians and their understanding of Scripture, begun by Clement, was reinforced by Origen. He also stressed the inexhaustible depths of the divine mysteries hidden in Scripture and the consequent inability of Christians to understand them.

Augustine affirmed that God had clearly revealed in his Word whatever was necessary for Christians to know (*On Christian Doctrine*, 2:9). He posed this series of rhetorical questions: "Why were the words of God spoken unless that they could be known? Why have they been made known, except that they may be heard? Why have they been heard, except that they may be understood?" (*Tractate on the Gospel of John*, 21.12). But Augustine also acknowledged the presence of "many and varied obscurities and ambiguities" in Scripture. Indeed, he admitted "some of the expressions are so obscure as to shroud the meaning in the thickest darkness" (*On Christian Doctrine*, 2.6). Augustine detected a divine design for this clarity-obscurity mixture: "With admirable wisdom and care for our welfare, the Holy Spirit has arranged the Holy Scriptures so to satisfy our hunger by the plainer passages and to stimulate our appetite by the more obscure." (*On Christian Doctrine*, 2:8; cf. *On Christian Doctrine*, 2.6). But how are believers to grasp the obscure portions of Scripture? In a way reminiscent of Irenaeus and Tertullian, Augustine articulated this principle: "we draw examples from the plainer expressions to throw light upon

the more obscure, and use the evidence of passages about which there is no doubt to remove all hesitation in regard to the doubtful passages" (*On Christian Doctrine*, 2.9; cf. 2.12).

Similarly, John Chrysostom offered that "the Scriptures are so balanced that even the most ignorant can understand them if they only read them studiously" (*Concionis VII de Lazaro* 3). This is especially true of any and all Scripture that is necessary. In defense of Scripture's clarity, Cyril of Alexandria responded to a heretic who criticized Scripture for its common language by explaining the reason for its simplicity: "That it might be understandable to everyone, small and great, Scripture has for practical purposes been written in familiar language. Thus, it is not beyond anyone's comprehension" (*Against Julian the Apostate*, book 7). Furthermore, Gregory the Great noted, "In public use, Scripture provides nourishment for children, just as in private use it strikes the loftiest minds with wonder. Indeed, Scripture is like a broad and deep river in which the lamb may wade and the elephant swim" ("Introduction," 4, *Moralia* [a commentary on the Book of Job]).

In conclusion, the early church affirmed both the clarity and obscurity of Scripture. Its affirmation of biblical clarity resonates with Scripture's own presumption of continued intelligibility. Its affirmation of scriptural obscurity, when limited to the relative obscurity of certain portions of the Bible, also accords well with Scripture (e.g., 2 Pet 3:15-16). But early church affirmations of a general obscurity of all of Scripture, like those of Clement of Alexandria and Origen, besides being supported by unbiblical arguments, eviscerate affirmations of scriptural clarity of all sense and power. Patristic attempts

at a nuanced approach—affirming that Scripture is both clear in its necessary parts while affirming that some Scripture is obscure—seem to capture the hermeneutical tensions with which the church of the twenty-first century still grapples. We should, then, look to the early church's lead of how to make progress in the midst of this tension. Its calls to follow sound interpretive principles, including the principle of the analogy of Scripture (that the more obscure portions of Scripture should be interpreted and understood by shining the light of the clearer portions of Scripture), should be heeded. May we, like those before us in the early church, approach Scripture with a conviction of its clarity and anticipate that our reading and study will result in fruitful understanding.

SBJT: Many voices in our day seriously question the value of traditional credal statements that Christians historically have confessed as orthodoxy. Why should contemporary Christians honor an ancient creed such as the Creed of Chalcedon?

Stephen J. Nichols: The new media ecology of the blogosphere has fanned the flames of many a theological controversy. One recent controversy played out over a paper delivered by Tony Jones, National Coordinator of Emergent Village, at the 2007 Wheaton Theology Conference. The paper was axed from a place in the table of contents of the conference essay book, published by InterVarsity Press. Tony Jones took to his blog, and from there the whole matter spun out like a web. The paper, according to Tony Jones, was deemed too far "off message" to be included. Others proffered that it just wasn't that good of a paper. Regardless, in the abstract to the

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paper he asks, “Does Chalcedon Trump Minneapolis?” Here’s how he answers his own question in the paper, “Whence Hermeneutical Authority?”

[The Council of Chalcedon] was a messy, messy meeting. That’s another way to say that it was a *human meeting*. That’s why I can only imagine what Michel Foucault would have said, had he been in attendance in 451. It’s not too hard to imagine: he would have found an event laced with the politics of power. That’s what Foucault opened our eyes to, that power is endemic to the human situation: “Wherever two or three of you gather, power dynamics will be among you.”

And what came out of this messy meeting? Oh, only the standard, orthodox articulation of Christology. The Chalcedonian creed of the two natures—one person of Jesus Christ, as well as every other theological construction from every other council, has human fingerprints all over it. These were messy meetings, rife with power and politics.

This leads Jones to advance his thesis: “[O]rthodoxy happens. (And here, I could just as easily say, ‘Truth Happens,’ ‘Gospel Happens,’ or ‘Christianity Happens.’) Orthodoxy is a *happening*, an occurrence, not a state of being or a state of mind or a state-ment” (Tony Jones, “Whence Hermeneutical Authority?” Paper delivered at the 2007 Wheaton Theology Conference).

Jones understands Chalcedon to be messy because of the controversy over Dioscorus, claiming it centered around Leo’s attempt to excommunicate Dioscorus. Consequently, the council forced Dioscorus to sit in the lobby. Jones, however, fails to tell the whole story. Leo’s attempt to excommunicate Dioscorus did not spring from an ambitious power play. In 449 Dioscorus convened a synod at Ephesus, dubbed the “Robber Council.” In

a power play, he oversaw this council that sought to creedalize the views of Eutyches, who held that the union of the two natures in Christ resulted in a new being altogether: Christ was neither human nor divine, but a third thing (*tertium quid*). Flavian, Bishop of Constantinople, refused to sign this synod’s statement. Dioscorus, having the blessing of the emperor, Theodosius II, dispatched an armed guard to pressure Flavian, Bishop of Constantinople, to sign this errant statement of the synod. Flavian refused. He was then beaten so badly he died a few days later. And that is why Leo sought to excommunicate him. Only after Theodosius II died in 450 could another council be convened, the Council of Chalcedon in 451, the council which produced its eponymous creed. Indeed, power politics were present at Chalcedon. Fortunately for the church, they were situated in the lobby.

The crucial issue here is not so much that Tony Jones didn’t quite relay the whole story. The issue is the “therefore” part of his thesis. Since Chalcedon was rife with power politics, he argues, it has nothing more to say to the church than any other similarly contextual or situated group or even individual at any moment in the church. Again, Jones declares, “For there is no orthodoxy *out there somewhere*, only here, in me and in you and in us when we gather in Christ’s name.” In his view Chalcedon does not trump Minneapolis and his church, Solomon’s Porch. Chalcedon warrants more credence, however, than Minneapolis or even Louisville or Lancaster.

Before the argument is made in favor of Chalcedon, a caveat is in order. The Chalcedonian Creed is not Scripture, not inerrant and not authoritative. For that matter, the Chalcedonian Council was

an historically situated event, with flawed human participants, not biblically and theologically and epistemologically perfect, neutral, objective automatons. Nevertheless, Chalcedon trumps us. First, the creed is a faithful retelling of Scripture, always the criterion for orthodox theology. To be sure it employs extra-biblical language, but by the time of Chalcedon the heresies had grown rather complicated. Complex heresies require a complex response. In that complex response, however, the Chalcedonian Creed echoes Scripture. Secondly, can the church of today, in any city, improve on declaring, as Chalcedon does, that Christ is fully God and fully human, with two natures united perfectly in one person?

Finally, and this is the often overlooked beauty of Chalcedon, this creed is not only immeasurably helpful because of what it says, it is also immeasurably helpful because of what it does not say. Heretical formulations boldly go where Scripture does not. Heretical formulations refuse to leave a particular doctrine in mystery. Instead, they prefer to “help” it, which of course causes far more harm than benefit. In light of this dynamic, the restraint of Chalcedon is remarkable. The 520 bishops at the council could have followed suit with the heretics, to somehow explain the mystery of the incarnation, of the God-Man, but they did not. How do these two natures, which are in our sense of things absolutely diametrically opposed, come together in one person? Chalcedon simply and artfully and wisely declares that they do, without attempting to explain how they do. Such restraint can be a theological virtue, an often times lost virtue in our present contexts.

As the pages of church history unfolded, more moments like Chalcedon

occurred in the life of the church, at places like Wittenberg and Geneva, and even at American cities, like Chicago, host to the three hundred signatories of the “Chicago Statement” of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy. Given current trends, the next generations will likely be adding the names of cities in African or Asian or South American countries. When it comes to Christology, however, the church in any city would do well to be trumped by Chalcedon, as well as Nicea, and these orthodox statements. Of course, Jerusalem trumps them all.

SBJT: Are there are any apologetic lessons that can be gleaned from the Church Fathers for us today?

Everett Berry: Today because the intellectual landscape of western culture is openly hostile toward Christianity, evangelicals are experiencing somewhat of a similar plight that late first- and early second-century Christian apologists faced. During that time, confessional allegiance to Christ went against the religious grain of both Jewish and Roman worldviews to the extent that many eagerly slandered believers by circulating unsubstantiated accusations of dubious behavior hoping it would denounce them to civil authorities. Likewise, as more sophisticated intellectual arguments began to challenge the rationality of Christian belief, the church gradually came under the onslaught of local persecutions beginning with the reign of Emperor Domitian. Eventually these scenarios compelled numerous Christian thinkers to express their convictions so they could hopefully achieve some level of civil tolerance as well as possibly persuade their opponents to embrace Christianity. And it is here where they proved to be involved in an activity with

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which we as evangelicals are concerned—namely, dialoguing with antagonists in the public square regarding our faith so as to delineate its impact on the issues which we all face as law-abiding citizens.

One of the more accessible thinkers from the patristic era who highlights this commonality is Justin Martyr (100-165 A.D.), because he remains as one of the most prolific writers of his time. Currently we have three works that are considered to be authentic: two *Apolo-gies* and a treatise entitled *Dialogue with Trypho*. Justin was a native Samaritan who initially followed a complex journey through Stoicism and several other philosophical systems that ultimately led him to Platonism. He finally converted to Christianity after an apparent encounter with a wise sage who conversed with him about the theological significance of the Old Testament prophets. Afterwards, he oversaw a catechetical school in Rome where he invested his time in exposing the inconsistencies of pagan worldviews and emphasizing the continuity between Christianity and the Messianic hopes of Judaism. We see these endeavors being fulfilled in all of his works. For instance, Justin writes *First Apology* (155-177 A.D.) as a polemic rebuking Roman authorities for their unwarranted treatment of Christians because their charges had not been sufficiently investigated. Additionally *Second Apology* (140-160 A.D.) acts as a supplemental treatise addressing both an assortment of local scenarios where various believers had been misrepresented and likewise clarifying misconstrued notions of what believers affirm about numerous theological topics. Finally, *Dialogue with Trypho* (150-155 A.D.) is a more theologically complex summary of an apparent two-day conversation held in

Ephesus between Justin and an inquiring Jew named Trypho. Herein, he establishes hermeneutical techniques for a Christian reading of the Old Testament by creating a kind of Messianic neo-midrash so he can illustrate the continuity as well as the superiority of Christianity to Judaism.

Now in retrospect as we examine Justin's work, it cannot be said that contemporary evangelicals are in the exact same cultural predicaments as those of the second century. Yet there are some undeniable points of commonality, because, just as there were unwarranted accusations against the life styles of the early Christians, hostile attacks on their central beliefs, and violent attempts to suppress their growth, so there are today around the world. The only difference is that the church's enemies wear different methodological masks as history progresses. Initially the first century accusation was a Roman-Hellenistic caricature, claiming that Christ followers were merely a quasi-Jewish anomaly. Then, centuries later, the Enlightenment critique was that Christianity was a cultural absurdity that was scientifically and rationally untenable. Now the current postmodern herald is that it is culturally scandalous because of metaphysical delusions of epistemic authority. No matter what its expression though, the same basic ethos exists within all of them, that is, to prevent the witness of Christ from influencing the issues pertinent to any given culture.

The question, then, that remains for us is whether early Christian apologists like Justin left any strategies which can still be utilized to preserve the faith now, and the answer is *yes*—two in particular. One is to recognize along with Justin that part of defending Christianity necessarily entails the exposing of the “unjustness” of other

religions. This element is critical today because, while evangelicals must be sensitive to people's backgrounds and thereby meet audiences in their religious contexts in hopes of explicating the Christian faith coherently, we must not be hesitant to repudiate other worldviews because of the delusion that the only way to maintain a voice at the public table of discourse is to concede a kind of pluralistic equality among religions. For believers like Justin, this capitulation fosters an atmosphere of injustice toward Christianity because part of its epistemic *justification* is the fact that other religions have no epistemic *warrant*. Joined with this conviction is a second assumption that complimented Justin's apologetic: the faithful activity of the church itself. Here part of the consistency of Justin's plea for fair treatment was based upon his confidence that believers were living up to the standards he described. In recent decades, this correlation between doctrine and behavior normally has been emphasized at levels that are focused upon training new converts. Yet for thinkers like Justin, it also was a critical part of his apologetic tone because the reality of faith being lived out by believers was one of the very reasons why injustice toward them was opposed. Today this kind of setting is woefully vacant because the lifestyles of average evangelical church members are virtually identical to nonbelievers, if not observably worse. But be that as it may, somewhere in our search for a more robust apologetic, we must re-establish a kind of *orthopraxic verificationism*. We must find ways to make doctrines observable so that they can be seen and not just heard. Perhaps, then, there is a kind of Christian empiricism—and it's called discipleship.

