



Interview with Adam Ployd

Author of *Augustine, the Trinity, and the Church: A Reading of the Anti-Donatist Sermons* (Oxford University Press, 2015).

Interview by Jonathan J. Armstrong

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Transcription by Tyler M. Nelson

Jonathan Armstrong: I'm delighted to be able to introduce to you Dr. Adam Ployd. Dr. Adam Ployd is Assistant Professor of Church History and Historical Theology at Eden Theological Seminary, outside of St. Louis, Missouri, and the author of the text that we'll be discussing today, *Augustine, the Trinity, and the Church: A Reading of the Anti-Donatist Sermons*. Thank you so much, Dr. Ployd, for joining us today.

Adam Ployd: Thank you for having me.

Jonathan Armstrong: Very excellent. Dr. Ployd, let's jump right into it.

Adam Ployd: All right.

Jonathan Armstrong: Your book explores the intersection of Augustine's doctrine of the Trinity and his doctrine of the church, and you call this intersection, "Augustine's Trinitarian ecclesiology." What precisely do you mean by this phrase?

Adam Ployd: Well, it's a dicey phrase because it's one that I take not from the 4th or 5th century but from late-20th century theology. In the latter half of the 20th century, it became very popular to talk about ways in which the personhood of God, the mutual indwelling of the three Persons, can be a clue to the way in which humans are called to be in communion with each other in the church. People like Zizioulas and others did excellent work on that. I'm taking that phrase, but I'm arguing that Augustine is doing something quite different. For many of the modern proponents of this idea, a Trinitarian ecclesiology implies that we can learn something about what it means to be the church from the Trinity because of some sort of ontological parallel, some sort of perichoresis in humans that is similar to the divine indwelling, or something about personhood that is a parallel between humanity and divinity.

I think Augustine is up to something different, and I think there are probably three ways we can understand his view of the church to be Trinitarian. First is that, if you've ever taken time to read his *De Trinitate*, he spends a lot of time talking first, not about the

Trinity in itself, but how we come to know the Trinity. For him, the way we come to know God is not simply through learning the truth, but through the purification of the heart and the mind, through the work of faith, through the cultivation of love of neighbor. What I argue first is that that reformation of our desire and of our thinking happens within the church. In that way, the church is part of his Trinitarian project—the way we come to know God as Trinity is through the healing life of the church.

Second, he uses—and this is probably the bulk of my argument—he uses certain pro-Nicene principles and exegetical moves to construct his understanding of the church. For instance, he'll take arguments about the person of Christ, and the way in which humanity and divinity are related in Christ, or he'll take arguments about the common and inseparable operations of the Father, Son, and Spirit, and he will take these arguments and these exegetical moves that associated with particular texts, and he's learned these from other Latin pro-Nicene folks like Ambrose [of Milan] or Hilary [of Poitiers], and he'll transition them and use them not just in talking about the Trinity but he'll then apply them to the church. That's sort of the second way that he's using these Trinitarian arguments and exegetical moves to construct the ecclesiology.

Finally, because of that, I think, his understanding of the church and, sort of, where the nature and essence of the church comes from, is defined by the work of the Trinity. In arguing against the Donatists, he wants to make the claim that the church is not defined primarily by what humans do or our efforts to maintain good boundaries and all that, though he thinks that's important, but it's defined primarily by the work of the Triune God. Especially the way the Son gives his spirit to his body so that we are united to each other, and in being united to each other, are united to the life of the Trinity as well.

Jonathan Armstrong: Thank you, Dr. Ployd, for that really beautiful response. In your research, was there a particular a-ha moment when you realized Augustine is using his Trinitarian theology to construct his ecclesiology?

Adam Ployd: Let's see. About eleven years ago, maybe, I was an M.Div. student and I was taking a doctoral seminar—hubristically, and ill-advisedly. It was a seminar on Augustine and we were reading his sixth sermon on the Gospel of John. I'm sitting there as a third-year seminary student trying to think if I have anything to say, and in this beautiful sermon where he's talking about baptism and the role of the Spirit—he's connecting the dove that is present at Jesus' baptism to the dove that is the one dove of her mother in Song of Songs, to the dove that is on Noah's ark, that is then, therefore, connected to baptism through 1 Peter—and all of these scriptural connections led me to want to explore how he's using dove imagery. It was that seminar paper that came out of that where I first said, you know, I think there's some pneumatological claims going on here that go beyond simply the North African ecclesiological conversations, and he seems to be drawing on some things that Ambrose and others say, and conversations that have nothing to do with the church. That was my first a-ha moment, but it was the beginning where I'm like, "Is this something? I don't know. Is there more?" Over the next few years, as I began doctoral studies and began the research, it was nice to have continual a-ha moments that were verifying there is something going on here.

Jonathan Armstrong: Thank you, Dr. Ployd. Dr. Ployd, in chapter two, you note that Augustine appeals to a very specific grammatical method—that is, prosopography—which you call prosopology, in the construction of his anti-Donatist polemic. Would you help us understand: What is prosopology and how does Augustine incorporate this into his broader argumentative purpose?

Adam Ployd: Excellent. Prosopology—what some folks refer to as prosopography, depending on which text you're reading—is a type of grammatical practice that students who were learning to read and interpret texts in the Ancient World would have learned when they're doing things like Homer, or Plato, or Virgil. If you're reading a dramatic text where there are different speakers, they're trained to know when to identify a speaker has changed, who a speaker is talking to, and who a speaker is talking about. It comes from the term "prosopon," basically meaning "character" in this sense, and it's basically a method of identifying: who are the characters in the scene, who's talking now, what are the types of ways this character speaks that's different from this character, when are there ambiguities in who's speaking, and how do you solve those.

This is a practice that Christian exegetes picked up very early on. Particularly, we see it in their exegesis of the Psalms. One of the assumptions of many early Christian exegetes is that the Psalms are somehow about Christ. Either they are talking about Christ or very often they are Christ speaking. You have things like, "The Lord said to my Lord," etcetera, etcetera. Well, there are two lords. How do we distinguish that? What is the lord that's speaking? What's the lord that's being addressed? My favorite example is the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts who, when he takes up Isaiah, he says, "How can I understand this unless someone can teach me?" The question he has when he reads things about the suffering servant is, "Is this guy talking about himself or somebody else?" That is a prototypical prosopological question that has to do with who he is talking about.

When we come to Augustine, he's inherited this way of interpreting the Psalms and a bunch of other texts to say, "Well, is this Christ talking in the Psalm? Is this the church talking in this Psalm? What's going on?" When he comes to John 3:13, I think, this allows him to solve a weird grammatical and theological problem. John 3:13 says something like, "No one has gone up to heaven except the Son of Man, who came down from heaven, who is in heaven," or something like that. It's early in the morning; I can't quote properly. For him, the problem is: If Christ is speaking about himself, if that's the prosopological answer, then how do we understand that any of us can go to heaven if it's only him? And especially, what about the saints in the past? The Abrahams, the Moses, the Isaiahs—those who Augustine believed were part of the true church—are they not in heaven? The way he does this is he talks about the complex grammatical subject that's being described in that verse. He talks about the way in which the Son of Man is both down from heaven and yet in heaven at the same time. This, for him as a good Nicæan, is a perfect example of how Christ is both divine and, when he becomes incarnate, he doesn't cease being in heaven, he doesn't stop being God, etcetera, but he is then Son of Man, so he is able to be present in the world as the man, Jesus. That

complex understanding of both/and—both divine and in heaven currently, but also down here—then leads him to say, “When he’s talking about himself, he’s talking about the humanity that he puts on. And the humanity that he puts on is not just the single individual, Jesus, but it includes all who are united to the body of Christ.” That complex grammatical subject of Christ’s first-person “I” is complex at one level because it involves, you know, the divine and the humanity. It becomes even more complex because the humanity includes all of those who are united to the body of Christ, so that we, the Christians who are part of that, find ourselves taken up in Christ’s first-person “I,” so that he can talk about it as singular. There is no one else who goes up. Only those who are part of his singular first-person body. The idea against the Donatists is that, if you separate from the church, you’re not just separating from good teaching or the right church. You’re separating from Christ. You’re separating from salvation.

Jonathan Armstrong: That’s very helpful. Thank you, Dr. Ployd. Dr. Ployd, in your text in chapter 3 of *Augustine, the Trinity, and the Church: A Reading of the Anti-Donatist Sermons*, you focus in on Augustine’s interpretation of Acts 4:32, in the first part of that verse, which reads, “Those who believed were of one heart and soul.” Of course, speaking of the earliest Christian community. In this chapter, you note that Augustine uses a specifically pro-Nicene reading of this text as a foundational understanding of his Christian unity and for understanding in church unity. Would you explain your reading of Augustine on this point?

Adam Ployd: That verse from Acts is one that gets picked up by people like Hilary of Poitiers or Ambrose of Milan, to use a rhetorical argument from the lesser to the greater. They point to this and they say, listen, if early Christians were able to be referred to as one heart and one mind, and yet they’re still divided among physical substances—they still have different material limitations because they exist as created humans—yet they can be described as one heart and one mind, how much more so, then, must we understand Father, Son, and Spirit to be united as One? It’s this great rhetorical flourish that is a standard rhetorical move from the lesser to the greater, and it gets picked up as a way of talking about some way in which the unity of Father, Son, and Spirit is like the human unity in the church, but they always emphasize it is so much more. It’s so much more unified in a way we could never truly be.

Augustine picks up on that and he uses that, but he adds an element to it. One is, he emphasizes that the way that unity is achieved, both in the early Christians of Acts 4:32 and, by extension, between the members of the Trinity, is through the agency of love. It is love that binds together the first Christians into one heart, one soul, and it is love that unites the Persons of the Trinity.

Of course, one of Augustine’s main contributions to Trinitarian pneumatology is to suggest that the Spirit can be understood as the love of Father and Son. He uses that to say: this unity that both humans share among each other in the church, and the members of the Trinity share that’s somehow connected, is affected by love. Then he joins that with Romans 5:5, which is the most-often quoted verse in all of Augustine, that “the love of God has poured forth in our hearts through the Holy Spirit that is given to

us.” For Augustine, he’s then able to say, “Okay, the love of God is the Holy Spirit. That’s the love that unites the persons of the Trinity. That is the same love that is given to us. That, then, is the love that establishes the unity of the church that Acts 4:32 describes.” The implication being that it is not just that the church loves each other and so we are united, or that God allows us to love each other and so we’re united, but the very love with which the church is united is the love that is God the Holy Spirit itself indwelling in us. That the idea that there’s some sort of parallel between the unity of humanity in the church and the unity of the Triune Persons is maintained, but it’s not because of any natural parallel between personhood, or perichoresis, or anything. It’s because God gives us the very love that is God’s own unity.

Jonathan Armstrong: That was a very powerful explanation. Thank you, Dr. Ployd. Dr. Ployd, in chapter 4 you write this, and I quote, “Augustine describes how baptism, because it is an operation of the Triune God whereby the Son gives the Spirit to his own body, brings about the unity of the church as a reflection of and the sharing in the life of the Trinity.” Unquote. For St. Augustine then, how is it that the baptism brings about this unity of the church?

Adam Ployd: To understand this fully, I think we have to get a sense of the background in the dispute over baptism. Baptism, especially in North African Christianity but in early Christianity generally, was the sacrament that established the boundaries of the church communion. Especially in the pre-Constantinian era, with people like Cyprian, when you understand the baptism creating the church, the baptism creates the barrier between the sinful world and the saintly members of the church: your sins are forgiven, you enter into this separate Holy Communion, and if there are serious sins that you commit afterwards then you might have to be separated from the church—either forever or for a brief period of time, depending. Baptism represents that sacrament for them that cleanses sin, that gives the Spirit, and that, therefore, kind of works as the bouncer almost for the saintly community, keeping all riffraff out. Or rather, changing the riffraff into saints.

Guarding baptism, and guarding the integrity of legitimate baptism, becomes equated with guarding the legitimacy and integrity of the church. The Donatists will argue with Augustine and what we will call Catholics, that because of the sins that their forefathers committed in the early-4th century, Augustine’s communion, they would say, doesn’t have true baptism anymore. Their sins have caused them to lose the Spirit. Therefore, they can’t impart the Spirit in baptism. Therefore, their baptism is false. Nobody’s sins are being cleaned; their communion is a mockery. Come on over to us. We have the actual Spirit and that integrity.

Augustine has several different arguments here, but one point he wants to make is that it’s not actually the individual bishop’s moral character that defines whether he has the Spirit or not. In fact, baptism is not performed by the bishop primarily; it’s performed by Christ. He takes John 1:32-33, “He it is who baptizes with the Holy Spirit,” and what he says is that in any baptism that’s done in the name of the Triune God, whether it’s in the right church or not, is done by Christ who gives the Spirit. The minister—the bishop—is

the agent or sort of the tool, like a craftsman using a hammer, but the primary agent is Christ giving the Spirit.

How does that mean that that is what creates the unity of the church? That would suggest that you don't need unity if you can give baptism anywhere because it doesn't matter where since Christ is going to give it. For Augustine, the primary gift of the Spirit, in addition to the forgiveness of sins, is that love of God. As he's established earlier, that love of God is primarily manifest in the pursuit of unity. One way he describes this is—building off this image of the Spirit as a dove—that doves moan. Why would the Spirit moan for anything? The Spirit has everything. Well, the Spirit moans on our behalf—sighs too deep for words, and all. What the Spirit is moaning for is that very unity of love that he has in the Eternal Trinity. Within the heart of the baptized, the Spirit causes the baptized to yearn for that unity among the church, which is also unity with God. For Augustine, if you have been baptized but you aren't pursuing the unity of the catholic church, then something is up, and the Spirit, for whatever reason, is not working in you. Either you might have done something to quench the Spirit, or more probably, given that it's Augustine, there's some mysterious will of God that you are just not being led back in.

Ultimately, the goal of baptism and the way it creates the church is not simply by purifying the community through forgiving the sins of those who come in, but by cultivating love—a love that is defined by the pursuit of unity, and especially a love that bears with the sins and frustrations of sinful people within that communion. Being able to remain committed to that unity of the church, despite the fact that it might have people that are sinful in it, despite the fact that it might do some bad things, is itself for Augustine a discipline that trains love in our hearts. So, all of that is the way in which the Spirit that is given in baptism works to unite us to the body of Christ through the love that he himself is.

Jonathan Armstrong: Dr. Ployd, thank you. Before we leave off, speaking of Augustine specifically, would you be willing to give our listeners a reading recommendation or two? Where would you start reading Augustine?

Adam Ployd: Oh, my gosh. I think the best place to start is his ten homilies on the First Epistle of John. I think they're probably the most beautiful of his sermons. They deal with the church, they deal with God, but they generally just deal with what the spiritual life is about: how, you know, we often have those twin pursuits of piety, love of God, and communion with God, but also love of neighbor. I think those sermons best embody the way those two are mutually entwined.

Jonathan Armstrong: Thank you. Dr. Ployd, If I can ask you a question that I'd like you to respond from your own theological perspective, be it Augustinian or not. This is the question: What would it mean for the church today to be united? How would we recognize this unity, and what can we do as Christians to pursue the unity of the church?

Adam Ployd: As a Methodist pastor teaching at a United Church of Christ seminary writing about Augustine and the unity of the catholic church, I spend a bit of time talking and thinking about this, and the short answer is: I don't know, but I have a few thoughts. A few months ago, when my book first came out, Eden was kind enough to have a sort of book release party. One of my colleagues, who works on Augustine over at St. Louis University, came over and gave a brief response that was very kind. He ended by saying, "I just don't know why you're not Catholic." I think that lingers with me whenever I read Augustine and I feel moved by his understanding of unity, and love, and all the stuff. For me, I think what we have to do is understand the way in which the body of Christ, as it exists in this world, might have to exist as broken. One thing that Augustine emphasizes is that the Donatists mistake hope for the thing hoped for. They think that they can create in this world the perfect sinless community that will only exist in the eschaton, in the Kingdom. Given the reality of where the global church is now, I think an Augustinian view of unity might also have to be a form of eschatological hope—one that we live towards and we live in hope of, but one that we don't say, "Which is the one church, the one communion we should all run to?" I think that the way the Spirit is working today is by enlivening the disparate, broken members of the body of Christ. I think that unity today is not going to look like the ecumenical dreams of the early-20th century. It's not going to look like all the churches becoming united under a single polity. I think it's going to look like all the different churches celebrating their particularity—celebrating the way they are a finger in the body of Christ and have a particular gift different from the knee—but being willing, through ecumenical advocacy, activity, mission work, etcetera, to find a way to exist in some sort of communion that might not be the same as full communion, or being within the same church body.

I think that, ironically, what Augustine offers me is the hope and faith that despite the visible unity, we can still cultivate the unity that the Spirit nurtures in us through love of one another in hopes that the God who was able to save us through the broken body of Christ on the cross might also save us in the broken body of Christ that is our scattered and arguing church now. I think unity looks like hope in the face of the fact that we're not united physically, but knowing that somehow God can still work through that, and by being committed to working with each other when we can discern how God is working through that. That's the best I've got.

Jonathan Armstrong: It's been our privilege today to be speaking with Dr. Adam Ployd, Assistant Professor of Church History and Historical Theology at Eden Theological Seminary, outside of St. Louis, Missouri, and author of the text that we've been discussing today, *Augustine, the Trinity, and the Church: A Reading of the Anti-Donatist Sermons*. Dr. Ployd, thank you.

Adam Ployd: Thank you, it was fun.