

AUGUSTINE FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

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I have never been trampled by a herd of evangelicals on their way to the Augustine section of the local bookstore. Perhaps the primary reason for this is “chronological snobbery,” our tendency to believe that the new books are better than the old ones. But such snobbery is to our detriment, because those books are precisely the ones that will help us to escape the limitations of our current era. In like manner, we rarely read the towering figures in church history (Philip Yancey is not a towering figure in church history). But it is precisely from the great theologians of old and from their books that we can learn the most about matters of theology and culture.

Augustine’s City of God

Augustine is one of those towering theologians and the *City of God* is one of those books, providing a model of how Christian pastors and theologians may speak with propriety and presence in their own social and cultural contexts.

In order to understand *The City of God*, one must grasp the basic historical context, starting with the sacking of Rome in August 410. The Roman intellectuals and common people scrambled to interpret Rome’s decline in general and this event in particular. Many of them concluded that the Roman gods were taking revenge because the Roman people had embraced Jesus Christ. Their multi-faceted argument was at once political, religious, and philosophical. In the wake of this event, Augustine received a letter from Marcellinus, a Christian who walked in power circles in Rome, asking for help in responding to the Roman narrative.

Augustine responded to Marcellinus with a 1,000 page letter. In his letter, the *City of God*, Augustine argued that the Roman intellectuals’ interpretation was wrong. He did so by ar-

guing that Rome's story was a micro-narrative situated in the midst of a much larger master narrative revealed in Christian Scripture. This biblical narrative tells of two competing cities, the city of God and the city of man. Each city has a basic love—either God or idols. Each city is symbolized in the Bible by an earthly city—Jerusalem and Babylon. Each city has a telos—eternal life or eternal death. In making his argument, Augustine not only provided a powerful biblical theology, he also demonstrated that he knew the Romans' literature, philosophy, politics, and history. He referenced their great authors with ease, quoted them favorably when possible, and showed how they fell short of Christian truth.

Augustine's Apologetic Strategy

Augustine's proclamation and defense of the gospel in a 5th century pluralistic Roman context is instructive for 21st century evangelicals in a 21st century American context. Among the many lessons we may learn from him, one is central: we must out-narrate competing stories of the world. In the face of Islamic, pantheist, and naturalist worldviews, we must communicate the biblical narrative in such a way as to show that it alone makes sense of the world.

Like Augustine, we must expose the flaws in competing narratives. In *City of God*, Augustine's brilliance is on display as he showed the Romans that their narrative failed even on its own grounds. In relation to their *gods*, he shows that the Romans never could decide which deities were actually in control, and that their own historians of religion (e.g. Marcus Varro) didn't really believe in the gods anyway. In relation to their *philosophers*, Augustine finds common ground in his admiration for Plato and the Neo-Platonists but exposes their hubris which kept them from believing in the incarnation and resurrection. In relation to their founding *historical narrative*, Augustine finds common ground in his admiration for Virgil but exposes the fact that the mythical story of Rome's founding is actually a verdict against Rome. Although Rome

viewed *justice* as the unique interpretive key to her “glorious” history, Augustine argued that Rome’s justice was no more than a veil for her lust for power.

Like Augustine, we tell the Christian story in such a way as to highlight its explanatory power. As Curtis Chang argues in *Engaging Unbelief*,¹ Augustine’s primary strategy was to proclaim the gospel story. He did not find it necessary to build a philosophical system from the ground up (although his books prove that he was capable of powerful, refined, and subtle philosophical argumentation). Instead, he builds common ground with his Roman readers by citing their poets and philosophers and then puts that common ground to whatever use he may while focusing on his central strategy, the proclamation of the Word of God. He argues that the biblical narrative explains the world better than the pagan Roman narrative.

Like Augustine, we must show how all competing narratives are transcended by the master narrative revealed in Christian Scripture. Augustine is not satisfied to show the tragic flaws in the competing narratives and the superiority of the biblical narrative. He also wants to make abundantly clear the fact that Christ and his church are not “part of” any other larger narrative. In particular Christ and his church are not “characters” in the greater Roman narrative. The truth of the matter is exactly the opposite: Rome herself is only a minor character in the grand sweep of the history of Christ and his people. All of history centers on Christ and his people rather than on Rome and her people.

While being deeply theological and compellingly evangelistic, Augustine’s critique of Rome was dialogical, timely, fair, reasoned, and eminently learned. Our evangelical churches can learn from this; we ought to encourage our people, our pastors, and our professors to nurture in one another the desire to exegete culture as well as Scripture, to cultivate the head as well as

¹Curtis Chang, *Engaging Unbelief* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 66-93.

the heart, to always be ready to give reason for the hope within and to do so in a cogent and persuasive manner as Augustine did.