

Martin Chemnitz's Reading of the Fathers in *Oratio de Lectione Patrum*

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Martin Chemnitz (1522-1586) is arguably the most significant Lutheran theologian after Martin Luther. He was a chief contributor to the Formula of Concord, provided the definitive Lutheran response to the Council of Trent, and stands out among his peers as one of the most able and discerning readers of the Church Fathers. His first published work, *Oratio de Lectione Patrum* (1554), introduces the reader to the historical context and theological significance of the normative Greek and Latin writers from the early Church. Although the *Oratio* dates from the beginning of Chemnitz's pastoral and theological career, it displays a sophisticated historical method and offers a generous appraisal of the wider tradition of the Church catholic. The concern of the following essay is to determine the manner in which Chemnitz reads the Church Fathers in this early treatise and how he addresses the points of agreement and disagreement between their theological efforts and his theological commitments.

I. Historical Context

When we consider Martin Chemnitz's early life and sporadic university training, his interest in and facility with the Church Fathers comes as something of a surprise. Chemnitz was born the son of a merchant and cloth-maker.¹ His lot in life was to continue in the cloth-maker trade. As a teenager, he displayed intellectual promise and was sent to the elementary school at Wittenberg by his widowed mother. Although he fondly remembers the great pleasure he had in hearing Martin Luther preach, he tells us in his autobiography that he remained at the school for only six months and profited little from the experience.

Various events in the life of the young Chemnitz, from the death of his father to the financial improprieties of his elder brother, prevented him

¹ For a fuller account of the life and thought of Martin Chemnitz, see Robert Kolb, "Martin Chemnitz," in *The Reformation Theologians*, ed. Carter Lindberg (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002) 140-153; J. A. O. Preus, *The Second Martin: The Life and Theology of Martin Chemnitz* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1994).

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from studying at any particular school long enough to receive a degree.² In 1538, at the age of sixteen, Chemnitz entered the cloth-maker trade, abandoning all hope, he tells us, of returning to school.³ When Chemnitz least expected to pursue his studies, opportunities arose. From 1539 to 1546, Chemnitz developed a pattern of studying at a school until he exhausted his savings, leaving the school and working as a tutor or clerk to raise more money, and then, with his limited resources, returning to school as long as the money would last. It was through this process that he studied for one year at the University of Frankfurt an der Oder and one year at the University of Wittenberg. At this time, however, his studies were not in theology but grammar and astrology.⁴

The violence of war and threat of plague worked together to provide Chemnitz with an opportunity to pursue advanced work in the Scriptures and theology. When the Smalcald War broke out in 1546, the University of Wittenberg was closed, and Chemnitz was forced to leave.⁵ He followed his relative, Georg Sabinus, to the newly formed University of Königsberg in Prussia.⁶ While there, plague broke out, and Chemnitz retreated to the countryside. Away from the resources of the university, Chemnitz read what was available to him: Luther's postilla and Peter Lombard's *Sentences*.⁷ Luther taught him the Scriptures, and Lombard taught him the

² Chemnitz tells us in his autobiography that he and his brother, Matthew, were not "well disposed" toward one another. Perhaps for this reason Chemnitz willingly records the misfortunes of his brother. Matthew initially fared well in the family business and was praised by all. His misfortunes came when he fell in love with the wrong woman. His mother would not permit him to marry the girl and forced him to marry another. The marriage did not go well and, as Chemnitz tells us, "he drifted into a wild and wayward life and squandered all he had." Matthew died "a miserable death" in 1564. See, Martin Chemnitz, *Autobiography*, trans. August L. Graebner, *Theological Quarterly*, 3 (1899) 473 and 475.

³ Martin Chemnitz, *Autobiography*, 476.

⁴ During his one year at Wittenberg, Chemnitz heard Luther lecture, preach, and lead a theological disputation but profited little as his attention was on astrology. This training, however, allowed him to offer "astrological predictions" to several princes which in turn provided him with much needed income to continue his studies. See, Martin Chemnitz, *Autobiography*, 479.

⁵ Despite his departure from Wittenberg, Chemnitz remained in contact with Melancthon. In 1549, Chemnitz wrote a letter to Melancthon in Greek that asked what method he should use in studying theology. Melancthon responded that "the chief light and best method in theological study was to observe the difference between the Law and the Gospel." Martin Chemnitz, *Autobiography*, 480.

⁶ Georg Sabinus (1508-1560) studied under Philipp Melancthon at Wittenberg and married his eldest daughter, Anna. It was through Sabinus that Chemnitz became acquainted with Melancthon in 1545.

⁷ Martin Chemnitz, *Autobiography*, 481.

Church Fathers.⁸ When the plague subsided, Chemnitz returned to Königsberg and was appointed the head of the ducal library from 1550-1553. Finally, Chemnitz had before him an extensive collection of biblical, historical, and theological works, and the time and financial security to pursue his studies. These three years of private study constitute Chemnitz's advanced training in the Scriptures and theology. It was also at this time that he immersed himself in the writings of the Church Fathers.

Theological disagreement with Andreas Osiander over the article of justification forced Chemnitz to resign his post at the ducal library. He departed Königsberg and returned to the University of Wittenberg. Chemnitz's theological talents were soon recognized, and he was asked by Philipp Melancthon to lecture on the *Loci Communes*. From June to October 1554, Chemnitz lectured on the doctrine of the Trinity. In August, he was asked by the superintendent of Braunschweig, Joachim Mörlin, his old friend and theological ally from his days in Königsberg, to serve as his coadjutor. He accepted the position and delivered his final lecture at the University of Wittenberg in late October. On November 25, Chemnitz was ordained to the ministry and published his first treatise, *Oratio de Lectione Patrum*.⁹ Five days later, he left Wittenberg.

Chemnitz's first publication is impressive on many counts.¹⁰ His subject matter is the continuity of evangelical theology with the Church catholic; a subject that could easily betray his limited training in theology and the history of Christian thought.¹¹ It is remarkable that someone with

⁸ Martin Chemnitz, *Autobiography*, 481.

⁹ Although the publication of Chemnitz's *Oratio* is dated November 25, 1554, he likely delivered it prior to June 1554 when he began lecturing on Melancthon's *Loci Communes*. Peter Fraenkel suggests May 16 or 27 as possibilities but does not provide any argument for these dates. Similarly, Irena Backus has proposed March 24, 1554. See, P. Fraenkel, *Testimonia Patrum: The Function of the Patristic Argument in the Theology of Philip Melancthon* (Geneva, 1961) 268, n. 58; Irena Backus, *Historical Method and Confessional Identity in the Era of the Reformation (1378-1615)* (Leiden: Brill, 2003) 244, n. 195.

¹⁰ Strictly speaking, according to Chemnitz, his first published works were two German almanacs from 1549 and 1550. Martin Chemnitz, *Autobiography*, 480.

¹¹ Although we do not seem to have the same urgency today to demonstrate the continuity of Lutheran theology with the church catholic, our Lutheran fathers exerted a great deal of labor on this issue. Numerous works from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries address this question, some more constructively than others. See, for example, Philipp Melancthon, *De Ecclesia et de autoritate Verbi Dei* (1539); Georg Major, *Vitae Patrum* (1544); Matthias Flacius, *Catologus testium veritatis* (1556) and *Magdeburg Centuries* (1559-74); Johann Gerhard, *Confessio Catholica* (1634-37) and *Patrologia* (1653); Melchior Nicolai, *Lutheranismus ante Lutherum* (1658). In addition to these treatises, the

such limited training could write at the beginning of his pastoral and theological career a brief manual on how to read the Church Fathers. As remarkable and daring as Chemnitz's treatise is, however, we must not forget that it is his first attempt at addressing the role of the Fathers in the theological labors of the evangelicals and demonstrates only his initial engagement and understanding of the resources of the greater tradition of the Church. In the *Oratio*, we are not dealing with the seasoned and mature Chemnitz, who has weathered controversy and endured personal trial. Rather, the *Oratio* represents an early, courageous, and ambitious attempt, by a young and self-taught Chemnitz, to engage the great tradition of the Church and establish the points of continuity and discontinuity between the Fathers and the Lutherans.

II. *Oratio de Lectione Patrum*

Chemnitz begins his treatise by identifying a number of ways to discuss the proper use of the Fathers. First, a person could offer a lengthy reflection on the appropriate way to read the Fathers without risk or danger (*tuto*). Second, a person could demonstrate the fruitfulness of studying the Fathers in addition to the study of the Scriptures. Third, a person could provide a brief introduction to the major Latin and Greek writers of the early Church. Chemnitz follows this third, chronological approach. By proceeding chronologically, Chemnitz tells us that the reader will discover the occasions "when they [the Fathers] spoke somewhat improperly, when something should be eliminated as less than helpful, and how a later age might correct something which had arisen in time of controversy."¹² Such a method, argues Chemnitz, will expose not only where the dangers lie with the Fathers but also in what areas they spoke correctly and usefully.

Chemnitz nowhere explains why he thinks these are the only approaches an individual might take in discussing the use of the Church

many dogmatic works from this time demonstrate even more clearly the critical and constructive engagement of patristic thought by the Lutherans.

¹² For whatever reason, Chemnitz's editors posthumously published the *Oratio* at the front of his systematic theology, the *Loci Theologici*. The problem, of course, is that the final, published edition of the *Loci* represents the mature Chemnitz, who continued to study and learn from the Fathers for another thirty-two years until his death in 1586. In any event, the *Oratio* is to be found in the translations of the *Loci* and in manuscript editions of the *Loci*. The translation used throughout this essay is: Martin Chemnitz, *Loci Theologici*, trans., J. A. O. Preus, two volumes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1989), 27a. Hereafter, cited as Preus followed by page number and column. All Latin references for the *Oratio* are taken from Martin Chemnitz, *Loci Theologici* (Frankfurt & Wittenberg, 1653).

Fathers. Indeed, it is disappointing to see that two of the three ways identified by Chemnitz are negative, including the course he chooses. He labors the point that the study of the Fathers is useful, *despite* the many infelicitous and improper statements that must be eliminated or corrected. The language used by Chemnitz is not language of expectation and opportunity but rather suspicion and duty. As we continue to read, however, we discover that this is not Chemnitz's understanding of the Fathers but rather the attitude of those for whom he is composing his treatise. He tells us in the introduction that he is writing at the request of friends. It is their concern that reading the Fathers is fraught with danger and perhaps unnecessary given the Lutheran commitment to *sola scriptura*.¹³ The young Chemnitz cautiously disagrees and proceeds with a restrained defense of the Fathers that identifies their many contributions that do not give offense. In his later works, the mature Chemnitz, the established professor and superintendent, will find no need to proceed cautiously in his reading of the Fathers or provide an apologetic rejoinder to those concerned with the use of the Fathers in articulating Lutheran theology. In the *Oratio*, however, Chemnitz's exuberance for the Fathers is muted and his goal modest. He offers for his friends a sympathetic reading of the Fathers, carefully identifying their strengths and weaknesses and thoughtfully showing how to read them with esteem and discernment.

Apocryphal Works

Chemnitz begins his review of the Fathers with two items claiming apostolic authority but lacking, in his estimation, historical credibility: the *Apostolic Canons* or *Constitutions* and a figure who writes under the name of Dionysius the Areopagite. He immediately dismisses the authenticity of the *Apostolic Canons* or *Constitutions* based on historical testimony,¹⁴ the fact that the canons increased in number over time,¹⁵ and the literary style

¹³ Cf. the Preface to the Epitome of the Formula of Concord (Tappert 465:2, 8; BSLK, pp. 767-69).

¹⁴ Chemnitz seems to regard the *Apostolic Canons* or *Constitutions* as one work with different titles. In fact, the *Canons* form the final chapter of the *Apostolic Constitutions* (ANF, VII, 500-505). With that said, the *Canons* were often circulated without the *Constitutions*. It is generally accepted that much of this material was compiled during the latter half of the fourth century in Syria, drawing heavily on earlier material like the *Didascalia* and *Didache*.

¹⁵ Chemnitz comments that the canons grew from 50 to finally 85 at the "sixth Council, around 677" (Preus, *LT*, 27b; *Loci*, 1653, 1). Chemnitz seems to be confusing the Trullan synod of 692 with the Sixth Ecumenical Council of Constantinople III in 680, which dealt with the Monothelite controversy. Chemnitz's confusion of these two councils is not uncommon and is quite understandable. The Trullan synod met to pass canons that would complete the work of the Fifth and Sixth Ecumenical Councils and

of the work. From his own research, only Epiphanius of Salamis defends the apostolicity of these canons, while Fathers such as Cyprian of Carthage demonstrate no knowledge of them. The literary inconsistency of the work and lack of early witnesses to their existence leads Chemnitz to reject their claim of apostolic authority. Despite the text's apocryphal nature, a careful reader will discover beneficial material on lay communion and the Apostles' Creed. The reader must exercise discernment, however, as the text advances ideas on virginity and baptism that are contrary to the Scriptures.

Chemnitz the historian emerges immediately and impressively in this opening discussion. He proceeds with a careful analysis of the *Apostolic Constitutions* and its historical reception, introducing the reader in a practical way to the tools necessary for the historical study of ancient texts. He canvasses the Fathers for comments on the *Canons* or *Constitutions* and determines that they are not apostolic but rather seem to have a fourth-century provenance. Although Chemnitz expresses concerns about some theological points in the text, his dismissal of its apostolicity and authority rests ultimately on his historical observations.

The second item of concern for Chemnitz is Dionysius the Areopagite. Chemnitz is aware of several works attributed to Dionysius: *The Celestial Hierarchy*, *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, *The Divine Names* and some letters. As he did with the *Apostolic Constitutions*, Chemnitz begins by canvassing the Fathers to determine their appraisal of Dionysius and finds that none of them mention anything about the Areopagite, including Jerome's catalog of ecclesiastical writers. Moreover, Chemnitz notes that Dionysius' Greek is vastly different from classical and apostolic writers.¹⁶ He concludes, as

often went by the name Fifth-Sixth Council (*Penthekte* or *Quinisext*). In fact, the synod of eastern bishops met in the same "domed room," hence the name Trullan, where the bishops of the Sixth Council met. Moreover, the Seventh Ecumenical Council of Nicaea II in 787 recognized the canons passed at the Trullan synod as the completion of the Sixth Ecumenical Council, which ratified no canons. The actions of Nicaea II most likely account for Chemnitz's comment.

¹⁶ Chemnitz's comment here is well taken. Not only is the Greek of Ps.-Dionysius' texts more refined and complex than the Koine Greek of the New Testament, but also his reliance upon Neo-platonism (Proclus) and his three-fold mystical theology (purification, illumination, perfection) clearly differentiate him from the apostolic writings. The first historical mention of Ps.-Dionysius' works occurs in 553 at a colloquy at Constantinople. It is for this reason that many date Dionysius to the early sixth century. In the West, the Lateran Council of 649 used his works against the Monothelites and firmly established his authority. His influence was not lost on Thomas Aquinas, who in the *Summa Theologiae*, cites Augustine, Ps.-Dionysius, and John Damascene more than any other Early Church Fathers.

Luther had done before him, that the works attributed to Dionysius are not to be associated with the individual mentioned in Acts 17.¹⁷

After settling the question of the possible apostolic origins of these texts associated with Ps.-Dionysius, Chemnitz turns to their theological value. He dismisses *The Celestial Hierarchy* and *The Divine Names*. Although there are numerous ceremonies found in *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* that are contrary to Scripture, Chemnitz does identify two points of historical interest based on this work.¹⁸ At whatever time Dionysius wrote there was no practice of invoking the saints nor were there prayers for the dead to be delivered from purgatory.¹⁹ Finally, Chemnitz ends by praising Dionysius for discussing baptismal sponsors and their duties.²⁰

¹⁷ Luther offers many critical comments on Ps.-Dionysius. For two good ones, see Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 55 vols., ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press; St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955-1986), 1:235 and 36:108 [henceforth LW]. Not everyone in the sixteenth century considered Ps.-Dionysius's works apocryphal. Georg Witzel, an early convert to Lutheranism who later returned to Rome and wrote against Luther, regarded Ps.-Dionysius as Paul's co-worker and therefore the most apostolic of all the Fathers. Witzel exploited the apostolicity of Ps.-Dionysius to argue against the elimination of ceremonies in the liturgy by the Lutherans. Witzel's concern is ecclesiology but his efforts are largely devoted to the witness of the Church Fathers. Here we see a clear example of the relationship between ecclesiology and patrology during this period, as is also seen with Philipp Melancthon's *De Ecclesia et de autoritate Verbi Dei* (1539). See, Georg Witzel, *Typus ecclesiae catholicae* (1540) 4-6, cited in Backus, *Historical Method and Confessional Identity*, 46.

¹⁸ Cf. *Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope*, 71 (Lappert 332; BSLK, 492).

¹⁹ Chemnitz's comment on the invocation of the saints is more an argument from silence than anything else. Dionysius does discuss the intercession of the saints and invocation several times (EH VII:561AB; Luibheid, 254-55). He does not, however, divulge the content of the invocation, except, as noted by Chemnitz, in his discussion of the "hallelujah" (EH IV:485AB; Luibheid, 232). Similarly, Chemnitz's comment on prayers for the dead is only partly correct. Dionysius does discuss such prayers at length. Chemnitz's point, however, focuses specifically on deliverance from purgatory or prayers that remit the sins of the recently departed. Dionysius rejects that such prayers could in any way affect the judgment earned in this life by the recently departed. He does urge, however, that it is our duty to pray that God will overlook the sins of the faithful who depart (EH II:556D; Luibheid, 251-52; EH III:560A-564B; Luibheid, 253-56).

²⁰ Dionysius discusses baptismal sponsors in EH at II:393B, II:393D, III:400C-401A, and VII 568BC (Luibheid, 201, 202, 206-07, 258-59, respectively). On baptismal sponsors in the Early Church, see also Tertullian, *On Baptism*, ch. 18 in ANF, vol. III, 678; Hippolytus, *Apostolic Tradition*, xxi.4 in *The Treatise on The Apostolic Tradition of St. Hippolytus of Rome*, trans. Gregory Dix, revised by Henry Chadwick (London: Alban Press, 1992), 33; Egeria, *A Diary of Pilgrimage*, ACW, vol. 38 (New York: Newman Press, 1970), 123.

In dealing with these two apocryphal texts, Chemnitz reveals his skills as both historian and theologian. He critically examines the historical and literary circumstances of these texts to determine their claims to apostolicity. More significantly, and central to the question pursued here, Chemnitz does not free himself from the task of theologian in evaluating the content of these texts despite their false claims to apostolic authority. Chemnitz's commitment to the resources of the Church in articulating Lutheran theology is displayed in no better place than in his dealings with these two apocryphal works. No one would have criticized him had he, under the banner of *sola scriptura*, dismissed these works without comment because of their false apostolic claims. Instead, he engages their thought and comments on their strengths and weaknesses for the reader.

Ignatius of Antioch

Chemnitz begins his comments on the Fathers by commending the reading of Ignatius of Antioch but warning that many interpolations exist in the epistles available.²¹ Although Chemnitz's comment on Ignatius is brief and fails to identify for the reader the positive or edifying teachings to be found in his letters, he does provide a constructive example on how to deal with possible interpolations in patristic texts. He quotes a number of peculiar excerpts from the disputed letters circulating under the name of Ignatius and demonstrates how later Fathers, like Augustine, contradict the theology expressed by these statements. The assumption by Chemnitz seems to be that the orthodoxy of Ignatius will necessarily correspond to that of later witnesses like Augustine. Therefore, in the case of Ignatius, if a statement disagrees with a later writer or teaching of the Church, it is likely an interpolation.

By interpreting the writings of one Father through the lens of another, Chemnitz's practice appears to be simplistic and susceptible to the charge of establishing a patristic consensus on all theological topics. Indeed, at first glance, his handling of unacceptable statements in Ignatius' letters

²¹ The authenticity of Ignatius' letters has been complicated by the presence of a long, middle, and short recension of the letters. The long recension is not only an expanded form of the authentic letters of Ignatius, roughly identified as the middle recension, but also a collection of spurious letters associated with Ignatius. During the Reformation, the long and middle recension circulated in both Latin and Greek. It was not until the middle part of the seventeenth century that a consensus began to emerge on the authenticity of the middle recension. For further discussion of these issues and for an accessible English translation of Ignatius' letters, see *The Apostolic Fathers*, 2nd ed., trans. J. B. Lightfoot and J. R. Harmer, ed. Michael Holmes (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989), 79-118.

seems to undermine the careful historical and theological concerns demonstrated by him in his discussion of the *Apostolic Constitutions* and ps-Dionysius. We must be careful, however, in drawing too critical a conclusion about Chemnitz's interpretive move with Ignatius. He is not suggesting that the reader reduce the Fathers to a single voice or force a consensus of thought on them. His interpretive move to use one Father to clarify another in an effort to establish a historically reliable text is restricted to works that are known to contain interpolations. From this perspective, Chemnitz's recourse to later Fathers is a legitimate exercise in historical research. Although the modern reader will question Chemnitz's lack of sensitivity to the changing historical, theological, and political contexts of an Ignatius and Augustine, we must acknowledge that such concerns have less to do with Chemnitz's historical method and more to do with differing theological assumptions held by the modern reader as opposed to someone like Chemnitz. The ease with which Chemnitz is able to move from a second-century to a fifth-century author stems from his commitment to the truthfulness of the Scriptures and his assumption that the Fathers are engaged in faithful exposition of the Scriptures. If the Fathers shared the same task and sought to understand the same truth, then their conclusions should coincide, irrespective of changing historical circumstance. When they do not *and* we know that we are dealing with a defective text, as in the case of Ignatius' letters, we may conclude that these inconsistencies or discontinuities are additions and therefore not the genuine sentiments of the particular Father under consideration. This theological assumption permits Chemnitz to proceed with charity in his dismissal of questionable statements by the Fathers in texts that are known to contain interpolations.

Irenaeus

The first theologian whose writings are extant and not interpolated is Irenaeus of Lyon. Chemnitz remarks that only his *Against Heresies* survives in a rather bad Latin translation.²² He acknowledges the existence of some Greek fragments in Epiphanius and even mentions a rumor claiming that

²² Today we possess Irenaeus' complete treatise only in a fourth-century Latin translation. Many Greek fragments do survive and are conveniently collected, along with the complete Latin text, in the *Sources Chrétiennes* volumes of Irenaeus' work. For an English translation see *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1. Today we possess an additional work by Irenaeus, *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, discovered in 1904 in a thirteenth century Armenian manuscript. This work is translated into English under the title *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching* in the *Ancient Christian Writers* series, number 16.

an entire Greek text exists.²³ The presence of the Greek text would, Chemnitz argues, resolve the inadequacies of the Latin translation and perhaps resolve some of the difficulties found in Irenaeus' text.

Chemnitz's comment on Irenaeus is lengthy and reveals his great esteem for Irenaeus. He begins by insisting that Irenaeus' historical context must be known before an adequate appraisal of his theology can be given. By contextualizing the writings of the Fathers, we are better prepared, argues Chemnitz, to understand their approach to certain critical issues and resolve any inadequate statements made by them. Here we see Chemnitz allaying any concerns that may have arisen with his handling of Ignatius. Since Irenaeus' text is not suspected of containing interpolations, no recourse to the thought of later Fathers will explain away difficulties found in his text. With that said, Chemnitz is not content to dismiss statements or teachings by Irenaeus that cause offense. A good reader who takes seriously the task of the Fathers and assumes that they are attempting to expound faithfully the Scriptures must attend to historical context in order to understand why such problematic statements were made at all. It is only by establishing such a context that benefit can be found even in moments of strong disagreement with the Fathers. To reduce this to a platitude, we must learn from their mistakes. The only way to do that is to understand how and why they made their mistakes.

When we read Irenaeus, we must be aware that he is confronting Gnostics who are rejecting certain parts of Scripture under the name of apostolic tradition. Irenaeus counters these arguments by appealing to the unity of the Old and New Testaments based upon two authorities: the rule of faith (*regula fidei*) common to all Christian churches and the Scriptures. Because of their dependence on one another, whatever does not agree with these two authorities is heretical. The mutuality that exists between these two sources means that a person cannot cling to a tradition that is in opposition to Scripture any more than a person can advance a novel reading of Scripture that opposes the rule of faith common to all churches. Chemnitz pauses to emphasize the importance of this point for his readers in their own theological efforts. Rather than compromising the evangelical commitment to *sola scriptura*, this emphasis on the rule of faith is a bold assertion that Lutheran theology is in continuity with the faith of the Early Church Fathers. For Chemnitz, the rule of faith or tradition endorsed by

²³ The first edition of the Greek fragments of Irenaeus' work was not published until 1570 by Nicolas Des Gallars. On the use of Irenaeus during the sixteenth century and editions of his work, see Irena Backus, *Historical Method and Confessional Identity*, 134-152.

Irenaeus is comprehended in the Apostles' Creed. Although Irenaeus never cites the creed in exactly the same words that it would later assume, his various renderings of the rule of faith closely summarize its content.²⁴ Since the Apostles' Creed is a faithful and accurate summary of the scriptural witness about God and his saving work, it rightly serves as an authority in theological reflection.

After determining Irenaeus' historical context, Chemnitz turns to an appraisal of his theological contributions to the Church. He especially commends to the reader the valuable doctrinal points made by Irenaeus concerning the two natures in Christ, the Eucharist, and that the fathers in the Old Testament were saved by the same faith as the saints of the New Testament.²⁵ When Irenaeus is found lacking in points of doctrine, it is either the result of context or simply superficial statement. Because his Gnostic opponents wished to attribute the cause of sin to God, Irenaeus was forced to speak too ambitiously about free will and not say enough about the gravity of sin. Such statements, however, are easily accounted for because of his opponents. Chemnitz explains, "We can read these points in many places in Irenaeus and, when we see clearly both the cause and the occasion of what he says and why he speaks the way he does, then his words can be read without offense and with real profit."²⁶ Despite his understanding of free will, Irenaeus does in places make "a proper and careful statement concerning faith in Christ and justification."²⁷ Amidst these sound teachings, a few unfortunate things are found, such as Irenaeus' argument that Christ lived to be nearly fifty and his millenarianism.²⁸

²⁴ Chemnitz refers to Irenaeus' rule of faith as either tradition or the creed. It is true that Irenaeus often echoes parts of the Apostles' Creed but it should be noted that no verbal fixity exists for Irenaeus in recounting the rule of faith. For him content, not verbal fixity, is important. Chemnitz's reference is no doubt to *Against Heresies*, I.10; ANF, I, 330-332.

²⁵ Preus, *LT*, 29a (*Loci*, 1653, 2). The final point observed by Chemnitz is central to the whole of Irenaeus' treatise.

²⁶ Preus, *LT*, 29a (*Loci*, 1653, 2).

²⁷ Preus, *LT*, 29a (*Loci*, 1653, 2). On faith in Christ and justification, see *Against Heresies*, III.18-23; ANF, I, 445-458.

²⁸ Preus, *LT*, 29a (*Loci*, 1653, 3). For the reference concerning Christ's age and why Irenaeus makes this argument, see *Against Heresies*, II.22. Irenaeus did hold millenarian notions and these are found in the last five chapters of his long work. It is worth noting that most manuscripts of Irenaeus' text do not include these chapters because of the views contained in them. The Fathers began questioning and rejecting millenarianism not long after Irenaeus. The two principal opponents were Origen and Augustine. Chemnitz could not have known about these teachings first hand since they were not

Cyprian

Chemnitz highly praises the sanctity of Cyprian's life and the constancy of his confession.²⁹ He knows of four books of letters from Cyprian that were written during a time of persecution and are therefore filled with words of comfort and exhortation for those imprisoned. Although Cyprian in many places argues that theological disputes must be established on the basis of the Scriptures, his historical context led him to embrace certain errors. During times of persecution, many would deny their faith in order to spare their lives and then seek an easy return to the Church when the threat had subsided. If the threat returned, argues Chemnitz, they would not only be the first to renounce their faith but also betray others. To counter the destructive efforts of these individuals on the community at large, Cyprian required public satisfactions for the forgiveness of sins and suggested that sins could only be absolved by such satisfactions. Cyprian's false teaching and "harsh words" on satisfactions, although wrong and burdensome to the conscience, can be understood "if a person considers their cause and the thinking of those times."³⁰

Cyprian did involve himself in an error on a fundamental doctrine that cannot be explained away by appeal to historical circumstance. Cyprian, along with the Council of Carthage in 220, argued that "baptism is not valid unless it is administered by an orthodox and pious minister."³¹ If

published until 1575 by Francois Feu-ardent. See, Irena Backus, "Francois Feu-ardent éditeur d'Irénée: le triomphe de la Grande Église et le rejet du millénarisme," in *Tempus edax rerum. Le bicentenaire de la Bibliothèque nationale de Luxembourg (1798-1998)* ed. Luc Deitz (Luxembourg: Bibliothèque nationale, 2001), 11-25.

²⁹ Chemnitz's comment on the constancy of Cyprian's confession reflects a larger interest in the sixteenth century for martyr stories and confessions. There were, for example, martyrologies written by the Lutheran Ludwig Rabus (1551), the Calvinist Jean Crispin (1554), and the English Puritan John Foxe (1554). For a discussion of Ludwig Rabus and the role of saints and martyrs in the Lutheran tradition, see Robert Kolb, *For all the Saints: Changing Perceptions of Martyrdom and Sainthood in the Lutheran Reformation* (Macon, GA: Mercer Press, 1987).

³⁰ Preus, *LT*, 30a (*Loci*, 1653, 3).

³¹ Preus, *LT*, 30a (*Loci*, 1653, 3). Agrippinus summoned the Council of Carthage in 220 to debate the issue of whether those baptized outside the Catholic Church can be received with only the laying on of hands or if they must be received through catholic baptism. Agrippinus argued that they must be baptized. Similarly, Cyprian, who served as bishop of Carthage from 248-258, summoned annual councils to discuss the many theological and ecclesiological issues raised by the persecution of Christians under the Emperor Decius and the implications of Christian clergy renouncing or compromising their faith in order to avoid persecution. The Council of Carthage in 255 reaffirmed the rigid stance taken by Agrippinus in 220 that "heretics" must be received into the Catholic Church through (re)baptism. Cyprian further argued that any priest or deacon

anyone received baptism from a priest who subsequently demonstrated cowardice in the face of persecution and committed an act of apostasy, then the baptism was no longer valid and another must be administered. Cyprian's error meant that the efficacy of the sacrament rested with the priest performing the baptism and the state of his moral character. This error, notes Chemnitz, would be enthusiastically embraced by the Donatists in the fourth century and corrected by Augustine.

Chemnitz deliberately dwells on the manner in which Augustine corrected Cyprian's error. He appealed, explains Chemnitz, to the Scriptures and demonstrated that the efficacy of the Sacrament depends on the Word of God, not on human actions or words. For Chemnitz, Augustine's handling of Cyprian should serve as a paradigm for how a person reads the Fathers. In this case, the great African bishop, Cyprian, is corrected by a later and equally significant African bishop, Augustine. Both are towering figures in the world of the early Church. Cyprian falsely understands the efficacy of the sacraments and is gently corrected by Augustine with an appeal to an authority greater than both of them, the inspired Word of God. Augustine corrects Cyprian in a manner that preserves his honor and respects his pious contributions to the Christian faith.³² Cyprian the martyr is praised for the sanctity of his life and the constancy of his confession but is corrected for straying from the clear teaching of Scripture on baptism. His many theological contributions are neither rejected nor in any way compromised by the stain of this one false opinion. It is, argues Chemnitz, the responsibility and obligation of later theologians and students of Scripture to honor the efforts of Cyprian as a member of the body of Christ and correct his teaching in a brotherly way on baptism. This is what Augustine did and this is what Chemnitz would have his readers do in their own consideration of the Fathers.

The Fourth Century

The fourth century is, for Martin Chemnitz and all students of the Church Fathers, one of the most remarkable periods in the history of the Church. The historical landscape of the Christian community undergoes significant changes from the beginning of the century to the end. Christians enter the fourth century as a persecuted minority and leave it as

who compromised his faith during persecution should be received only as a layperson and must not be permitted to serve again as an ordained minister in the Church. See, Cyprian, *Epistle LXXI* (ANF, V, 378-79 and 565-72). For a good and accessible introduction to the life and thought of Cyprian, see J. Patout Burns Jr., *Cyprian the Bishop* (London: Routledge, 2002).

³² Preus, *LT*, 30a (*Loci*, 1653, 3).

the protected majority. Their worship space moves from private house churches to grand public basilicas. Memories of Christian martyrs are replaced with magnificent tales of desert monks. All of these changes were made possible by the Edict of Milan in 313. The Emperors Constantine and Licinius guaranteed with this Edict the toleration of all religious groups in the Roman Empire, the restoration of confiscated property to the Christians, and the public gathering of Christians for worship and theological discussion. The possibility of public theological debate providentially coincided, notes Chemnitz, with the flourishing of nearly all of the "greatest Fathers" in the early Church.³³ Chemnitz proceeds in his discussion to introduce the reader to the great works and labors of the major fourth-century writers. As we will see, however, his engagement with these Fathers is hindered on a number of occasions by lack of access to or familiarity with their writings.

Athanasius

Chemnitz begins his discussion of the fourth century with Athanasius the Great. According to Chemnitz, his biography is well known to all, but access to his writings is difficult.³⁴ Chemnitz is aware of a Latin translation of *Against the Nations* (*Contra Gentes*) and *On the Incarnation* (*De Incarnatione*) but offers no comment on their substance.³⁵ Despite the great

³³ Preus, *LT*, 31a (*Loci*, 1653, 4).

³⁴ A lengthy discussion of Athanasius and his defense of Nicene orthodoxy would have been available to Chemnitz in John Cario's *Chronica* which Melancthon revised, to some degree, and which Luther referred to as *Chronicon Carionis Philippicum*. There is debate on how much of the *Chronica* comes from Melancthon's pen and how much of it retains Cario's contribution. The material on the Early Church seems indebted to Melancthon's historical endeavors and revision. For a discussion of these issues see, P. Fraenkel, *Testimonia Patrum*, 53; E. Menke-Glückert, *Die Geschichtschreibung der Reformation und Gegenreformation* (Leipzig, 1912), 25; and G. Münch, *Das Chronicon Carionis Philippicum: Ein Beitrag zur Würdigung Melancthons als Historiker* (Magdeburg, 1925). For a brief introduction to the *Chronicon Carionis*, see Irena Backus, *Historical Method and Confessional Identity*, 327-338.

For an impressive survey of the events and theological issues related to the Council of Nicaea, the major synodical gatherings from Nicaea (325) to Constantinople (381), the terminology deployed by the Arians, Photinians, and Pro-Nicenes, and the place of Athanasius in these debates, see *Chronicon Carionis*, pars II, book iii (CR 12:974-991).

³⁵ P. Fraenkel notes that a Latin translation of *Contra Gentes* was printed in 1532 in Wittenberg. See P. Fraenkel, *Testimonia Patrum*, 268. *Contra Gentes* and *De Incarnatione* are two parts of a single treatise written by Athanasius sometime after the Council of Nicaea in 325. The dating for this treatise is greatly disputed, but I am persuaded by Khaled Anatolios that it should be dated somewhere in the late 320s or early 330s. See Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought* (London: Routledge, 1998), 26-30. For an excellent introduction to these works and the theology of Athanasius, see

reverence voiced by Chemnitz, he does not display any engagement with Athanasius' writings at this early stage of his theological career.³⁶

A recurring theme throughout Chemnitz's treatise is his limited knowledge of the Greek Fathers. That is to say, if the Father writes in Latin, he has some direct knowledge of his writings. If the Father writes in Greek, Chemnitz's knowledge is derivative; it comes by way of Latin writers, which, most of the time, means Augustine. We see this with Chemnitz's brief comment on Athanasius and also with such writers as Origen, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Epiphanius of Salamis; none of whom are discussed in this essay. It is difficult to explain exactly why this is the case. The answer may be a combination of things: it may be the result of the limited holdings at the ducal library in Königsberg; it may be a reflection of Chemnitz's facility with Greek at this early stage of his theological career; or it may simply be that his short tenure as librarian did not afford him the opportunity to read as widely as this treatise on the Fathers suggests.

Hilary of Poitiers

Chemnitz's knowledge of Hilary of Poitiers far exceeds his familiarity with Athanasius. He knows all of Hilary's major writings and displays an awareness of their main features. Hilary wrote a treatise on the Trinity (*De Trinitate*) and on eastern councils (*De Synodis*).³⁷ If not for Hilary, notes Chemnitz, our knowledge of the theological debates at these eastern councils would be seriously impoverished. Hilary also produced commentaries on the Gospel of Matthew and the Psalms. Most

Thomas Weinandy, *Athanasius: A Theological Introduction* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007).

³⁶ Athanasius was a dominating personality in the trinitarian debates of the fourth century. He labored endlessly in support of the theological position advanced at the Council of Nicaea in 325. Along with many of the writers that follow, Athanasius articulated Nicene orthodoxy against the theological and polemical sympathies of those embracing the main lines of Arius' thought and the implications of his subordinationist theology. It is likely the broad outlines of this narrative that Chemnitz has in mind when he refers to Athanasius' biography. For a cautionary note on the tendency to exaggerate the biography of Athanasius into the "legend of Athanasius", see Francis Young, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 65-68. For a survey of the theological debates during the fourth century, see R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy, 318-381* (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2005) and Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

³⁷ For an introduction to Hilary's Trinitarian theology, see Carl L. Beckwith, *Hilary of Poitiers on the Trinity: From De Fide to De Trinitate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

importantly, Hilary is an early witness to justification and repeatedly asserts that we are "justified by faith alone."³⁸ With that said, there are problems with Hilary. Chemnitz warns the reader that Hilary often "speaks in an unsatisfactory way" in his commentaries and advances a fundamental Christological error on the suffering of Christ.

Chemnitz's warning about Hilary's unsatisfactory statements and his Christological error reveals his own historical indebtedness to the medieval reception of Hilary's writings. For example, Chemnitz argues that the unsatisfactory comments found in Hilary's commentaries, which he never identifies for us, are from the works of Origen. In a somewhat similar move, though with different motivation, Abelard, writing in the twelfth century, comments that anything of a questionable nature found in the writings of Hilary should be attributed to Origen.³⁹ Abelard, however, is not seeking to protect Hilary from association with Origen. On the contrary, he is making an argument for the salutary use of Origen by showing how most of the major Church Fathers, like Hilary, used him freely. Chemnitz follows a different strategy and seeks to insulate Hilary from unsatisfactory statements. What seems not to have occurred to Chemnitz, as it did for Abelard, is that such a defense of Hilary still leaves the reader wondering why he would have incorporated such careless statements from Origen into his own writings and passed them off as his own. Perhaps more problematic is the assumption that Hilary himself did not realize that they were unsatisfactory. It would seem that if Hilary "borrowed" from Origen, he must have been in sympathy with such statements. Chemnitz does not address any of this.

The second example of Chemnitz's indebtedness to the medieval reception of Hilary's writings deals with his awareness of Hilary's Christological assertion that Christ suffered on the Cross without experiencing pain. If removed from the overall theological context of the

³⁸ Preus, *LT*, 30b (*Loci*, 1653, 4). For an example of Hilary on justification by faith, see *De Trinitate*, IX.16.7-19 (*Sources Chrétiennes*, no. 462, p. 46; NPNF, ii, IX, 160). The text that Chemnitz likely has in mind, however, is from Hilary's *Commentary on Matthew*. This is the text he cites in his later *Enchiridion* and the text circulating among the Wittenberg theologians. See, for example, Johannes Brenz, *Confessio Wirtenbergensis*, (Tübingen, 1590; first edition 1552), 4. Chemnitz shows no familiarity with the material on Hilary in Georg Major's *De Origine Et Autoritate Verbi Dei* (Wittenberg, 1550) f2.

³⁹ For example, Abelard wrote, "When we find some ideas [in Hilary's writing] that are out of harmony with truth or the writings of other saints, they are to be attributed to Origen rather than Hilary, even though Hilary himself does not make this distinction." Abelard, *Sic et Non*, prologue (PL 178:1342-43); quoted in Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, trans., Mark Sebanc (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 202.

fourth century and the argument developed by Hilary in the final books of *De Trinitate*, his Christology strikes us as sailing too close to the shores of Docetism. This particular argument by Hilary has endured more criticism throughout the history of the Church than any other aspect of his theology.⁴⁰ In the thirteenth century, Bonaventure was so troubled by Hilary's comments on Christ's suffering that he suggested they might be *contra fidem*.⁴¹ Attempts were made by Bonaventure, Albert the Great, and Thomas Aquinas, among others, to reconcile Hilary's statements with the Church's teaching. Frustrated with efforts to recover an orthodox understanding of Hilary's Christology, someone, perhaps Bonaventure himself, relieved the situation by circulating a pious rumor. It was said that William of Paris had seen a statement of retraction in which Hilary corrected his unorthodox statements on Christ's suffering.⁴² This rumor freed the medieval writers from defending Hilary's seemingly untenable Christological position and preserved his orthodoxy and theological integrity for the medieval Church. It is this pious rumor that Chemnitz cites in his own comment on Hilary's Christology and, like his theological predecessors, uses to insulate Hilary from any association with unorthodox statements on Christ.⁴³

Basil the Great

Chemnitz tells us that Basil wrote many doctrinal treatises and letters well worth reading. Chemnitz offers high praise of Basil saying, "How expertly and reverently he spoke on the article of justification in his writing on humility and on many other subjects!"⁴⁴ Despite his strong

⁴⁰ For a charitable reading of Hilary's Christology, see Carl L. Beckwith, "Suffering Without Pain: the Scandal of Hilary of Poitiers' Christology," in *The Shadow of the Incarnation: Essays in Honor of Brian E. Daley, SJ*, ed. Peter Martens (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 71-96.

⁴¹ Kevin Madigan, "On the High-Medieval Reception of Hilary of Poitiers's Anti-"Arian" Opinion: A Case Study of Discontinuity in Christian Thought," *Journal of Religion* 78:2 (1998), 215, 221-222.

⁴² Bonaventure suggests that William of Paris had seen this letter. See, Madigan, "On the High-Medieval Reception," 223, n. 40-41.

⁴³ Preus, *LT*, 31a (*Loci*, 1653, 4).

⁴⁴ Preus, *LT*, 31b (*Loci*, 1653, 4). In Chemnitz's later work, the *Enchiridion*, he tells us exactly what he found so delightful in Basil's homily with respect to justification. Basil wrote, "This is perfect and unspoiled glorying in God, when one is not exalted because of his own righteousness, but acknowledges that he lacks righteousness and that he is justified alone by faith in Christ." Martin Chemnitz, *Ministry, Word, and Sacraments: An Enchiridion*, trans., Luther Poellot (St Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1981), 78; Basil of Caesarea, *On Humility*, trans. Sister M. Monica Wagner, C. S. C., *Fathers of the Church*, vol. 9 (Washington D.C.: 1962), 479. Here is the full quote. (Note, I have slightly

statement on justification by faith, Chemnitz warns the reader that Basil spoke "in an unfortunate and improper way regarding free will and original sin."⁴⁵ It is not engagement with Basil that leads Chemnitz to this conclusion, but rather Augustine's own admonishment of Basil's statements. We see here, in a sense, Chemnitz's mediated knowledge of the Greek Fathers. When the writings of the Fathers are in Latin or a Latin translation, Chemnitz demonstrates first hand familiarity but at this stage of his theological development he does not seem to have engaged the Greek writers to a significant extent.

Ambrose

Chemnitz commends Ambrose for his various commentaries on Luke, Isaiah, and the Epistles of Paul. He acknowledges that the commentary on Isaiah was highly praised in antiquity but has since been lost.⁴⁶ The commentary on Paul's Epistles which, notes Chemnitz, is the "best" because it "speaks most accurately about justification," was not, however, written by Ambrose but by a figure known in the history of Christianity as Ambrosiaster.⁴⁷ That Chemnitz is thinking of Ambrosiaster here is confirmed by his later works where he actually cites material from this commentary under the name of Ambrose.⁴⁸ Chemnitz's confusion over the authorship of this commentary is a product of his own historical environment. Although Erasmus had argued that Ambrose was not the author of this commentary on Paul's letters, Chemnitz, even if he were familiar with Erasmus' position, may have been reluctant to concede the felicitous confusion of Ambrose with Ambrosiaster because of the polemical value of the commentary and its many fine statements on justification by faith.

altered the translation by rendering all instances of "δικαιοσύνη" as "righteousness" instead of "justice" as Sister Wagner translates.) Basil the Great writes, "The Apostle tells us: 'He that glorieth may glory in the Lord,' saying: 'Christ was made for us wisdom of God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption; that, as it is written: He that glorieth may glory in the Lord' (1 Cor. 1:30-31). Now, this is the perfect and consummate glory in God: not to exult in one's own righteousness, but, recognizing oneself as lacking true righteousness, to be justified by faith in Christ alone. Paul gloried in despising his own righteousness and in seeking after the righteousness by faith which is of God through Christ..." Chemnitz is likely indebted to Melancthon for this quote. See, Philipp Melancthon, *De Ecclesia et de autoritate Verbi Dei*, CR 21:616.

⁴⁵ Preus, *LT*, 31b (*Loci*, 1653, 4).

⁴⁶ We have only a few fragments of the Isaiah commentary, which have been collected in CCL 14, 405-08.

⁴⁷ Preus, *LT*, 32a (*Loci*, 1653, 5).

⁴⁸ See, Martin Chemnitz, *Enchiridion*, 78. Cf. Johannes Brenz, *Confessio Wirtenbergensis* (1590), 4.

Chemnitz continues by warning the reader that there are many statements in Ambrose on free will and original sin that are unsatisfactory and were eagerly used by the Pelagians. He does not give any examples but comments that Augustine has explained how these troubling passages should be properly understood in his *Contra Julianum*. Chemnitz's remark raises two issues. The first is something we have already encountered and deals with the type of familiarity Chemnitz has with Ambrose. His brief comment suggests that his knowledge is derivative and based on citations. Did Chemnitz actually read the commentary on Paul's Epistles at this stage in his theological and pastoral development or is he simply familiar with citations from the commentary that serve his own theological agenda? Similarly, did Chemnitz himself read Ambrose and come away with dissatisfaction on his many statements dealing with free will and original sin, or is he only familiar with these because of his engagement with Augustine?

The second issue deals with the development of Chemnitz's historical methodology in addressing the unfortunate statements found in the writings of the Fathers. A guiding principle for Chemnitz is that the expressions of the Fathers written before a controversy must be dealt with in a spirit of generosity and forgiveness. That is not to say, however, that these statements should ever be defended by means of verbal gymnastics or rhetorical persuasions. If a person says something contrary to the gospel, such words are to be rejected. At the same time, if the great witnesses and saints of old utter things falling short of the gospel, what better lesson for Chemnitz's readers to learn and what greater need for humility in their own theological endeavors? That lesson, which we have observed above, seems to be somewhat forgotten or at least obscured here by Chemnitz. He does not say that Ambrose's statements on free will and original sin should be dismissed because he wrote before the Pelagian controversy. Indeed, the astute reader is left wondering why such a comment is not made. Instead the reader is pointed to Augustine's *Contra Julianum* to understand Ambrose's statements. A quick glance at Augustine suggests, though, a different course of action.⁴⁹ For Augustine,

⁴⁹ The Pelagian controversy was on one level an extended debate over the use of Ambrose. Both parties claimed the bishop of Milan to support their respective theological positions. The dispute often centered on Ambrose's commentary on Luke. Examples of Augustine's defense can be found in *On Nature and Grace*, 63.74-75 in *The Works of Saint Augustine* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press) 1/23, 264-65; hereafter simply WSA. See also, *Answer to the Two Letters of the Pelagians*, 11.29-31 (WSA, 1/24, 210-14); *Contra Julianum* (WSA, 1/24) and *Contra Julianum opus imperfectum* (WSA, 1/25) et passim.

the stakes are higher. Ambrose is the bishop who baptized him and from whom he heard the gospel. Certainly, it will not do to suggest that Ambrose spoke too casually on the topic of our salvation. A different explanation must be found, and Augustine devotes his efforts to establishing the point that Ambrose has been misunderstood and falsely claimed by the Pelagians. Put simply, he is not susceptible to Pelagianism; rather he is a pillar of the catholic tradition.⁵⁰

Jerome

Chemnitz highly praises Jerome's facility with languages, his knowledge of grammatical and historical matters, and his Latin translation of the Bible from Hebrew and Greek. He commends the reading of Jerome's commentaries but warns that his doctrinal works are inferior to his peers. Indeed, notes Chemnitz, Jerome clung so zealously to extreme discipline and the value of good works for the remission of sins in his early writings that he spent much of his later career altering and retracting these statements to avoid being claimed by the proponents of Pelagianism.

Chemnitz does express displeasure with Jerome's harsh and excessive rhetoric. Indeed, notes Chemnitz, Jerome spoke so outrageously against marriage in his work against the monk Jovinian that Augustine was forced to write in opposition to his views. What is noteworthy, though, is not that Augustine disagreed with Jerome, something he often did, but the manner in which Augustine refuted him. In his treatise *On the Good of Marriage (De Bono Conjugali)*, Augustine writes about the blessings of marriage and opposes the harshness of Jerome's position. He does this, writes Chemnitz, "in such a winsome way" that readers hardly noticed whose "error" Augustine was correcting.⁵¹ Augustine's handling of Jerome seems to have made a strong impression on the young Chemnitz and becomes the model that he will follow in gently but resolutely correcting the theological positions of those as remote as the early Church Fathers and as near as his fellow Lutheran brothers.

⁵⁰ On this point of reinterpreting Ambrose along Augustinian lines, Neil McLynn has suggested that despite the prominent role of Ambrose in Augustine's spiritual autobiography, Augustine has perhaps exerted a greater influence over Ambrose by shaping the historical reception of him as a sympathetic Augustinian. Whether it is true or not that we read Ambrose through the lens of Augustine, it is clearly the case that the early Chemnitz did. See, *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed., Allan D. Fitzgerald, O.S.A. (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1999), 19. Cf. Neil McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan: Church and Court in a Christian Capital*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1994), 370.

⁵¹ Preus, *LT*, 32b (*Loci*, 1653, 5). See, Augustine, *On the Good of Marriage*, NPNE, i, III, 399-413.

John Chrysostom

Chemnitz begins his comment by mentioning that many in his day greatly esteem John Chrysostom's commentaries on Genesis, Matthew, John, and the Pauline Epistles. At the same time, Chrysostom's eloquence and rhetorical flourishes led him to make "certain unfortunate statements" on free will and original sin.⁵² These statements were seized on by the Pelagians and forced Augustine to recover Chrysostom's intention in his *Contra Julianum*.⁵³ Given that Chemnitz never identifies these statements for the reader and given his citation of Augustine, it is likely that he has not directly engaged Chrysostom's writings.

In the above comment on Ambrose, we noted that Chemnitz's appeal to Augustine's *Contra Julianum* introduced a different methodological course than the one he himself advocates at the beginning of his treatise on the Fathers. That is to say, when a Father speaks in an incautious or unfortunate way prior to a theological controversy, we do not seek to reconcile his statements with the Scriptures but acknowledge that the presence of controversy forced subsequent Fathers to speak in a more concise manner. When we read Ambrose and Chrysostom, we esteem their labors but dismiss their unfortunate statements on free will and original sin. The reason for Chemnitz's methodological move is quite obvious. The Fathers are human authors whose statements are not binding or authoritative in and of themselves but rest entirely on the Scriptures—a point that echoes Thomas Aquinas' hierarchy of authorities in his question on *sacra doctrina*.⁵⁴ In the language of the theologian, Scripture is *norma normans*, the norming norm, the final and ultimate authority in all matters of doctrine and life. To approach the Scriptures in this way is nothing more than to confess *sola scriptura*. It is this confession that allows Chemnitz to approach the Fathers with esteem and discernment. He need not trouble himself with verbal gymnastics in order to preserve the sanctity or honor of the Fathers when they make unfortunate statements. It is also for this reason that Chemnitz's continued appeal to Augustine's *Contra Julianum* creates confusion for the attentive reader. Augustine does not, indeed cannot, take the approach advocated by Chemnitz. Augustine finds himself in the middle of controversy and is not in a position to yield any ground to the Pelagians. If Ambrose or Chrysostom speak in a manner that seems Pelagian, exegesis is required to demonstrate their agreement with

⁵² Preus, *LT*, 32b (*Loci*, 1653, 5).

⁵³ Augustine, *Contra Julianum*, I.6.21-30 (*WSA* I/24, 282-89).

⁵⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I.1.8 ad 2.

Augustine and secure their catholic authority. From a historical perspective, Augustine had no other choice.

Augustine's approach to Ambrose and Chrysostom proceeds with very different theological assumptions than the method advocated by Chemnitz. It is here that we encounter confusion. Although Augustine is fully aware of the liberty he is taking with the disputed texts from his fellow contemporaries, he labors to convince his readers that the statements from writers like Ambrose and Chrysostom, when understood properly, which means in a manner consistent with Augustine, do not support the advocates of Pelagianism but rather confess what the Church catholic has always confessed about the necessity of grace, the depravity of sin, and the relationship between faith and good works. Augustine's theological assumption advances the idea that the Fathers spoke with a single catholic voice that is by implication always orthodox. Their sanctity and reputation suggest that they would not speak incautiously about an article of faith and therefore would at all times speak with a unified voice on the Scriptures and catholic Christianity. It is a short step from this false assumption to the establishment of a *consensus patrum* as a second and equal authority to Scripture. Chemnitz never acknowledges the tension caused by his approving use of Augustine's *Contra Julianum* and the different historical and theological approach to the Fathers introduced by such an appeal.

Augustine of Hippo

The comment on Augustine is the lengthiest one in the *Oratio* and reveals quite plainly the high regard and admiration that Chemnitz held for him. Here we encounter the Church Father who, "in the judgment of all," is given first place. Augustine lived during a time of many controversies on the chief articles of the faith. He devoted himself to answering these challenges and established the position of the Church on the foundation of the Scriptures. Augustine explained, writes Chemnitz, "the true position of the church more properly and clearly than the other Fathers, who spoke rather carelessly before the controversies had arisen, as Augustine himself admits."⁵⁵ There is a hint of self-reflection in Chemnitz's words; he sees himself living during a period of intense controversy when the article on which the Church stands or falls is under attack; an attack that Chemnitz sees from those outside of Lutheranism and within.

Augustine faced controversy on two fronts. He opposed those who would undermine Christianity and the City of God by blaming Christians

⁵⁵ Preus, *LT*, 32b-33a (*Loci*, 1653, 5-6).

for the destruction of Rome and those, like the Arians, who would undermine the gospel by arguing that Jesus Christ, the true Son of God, was not co-eternal and consubstantial with the Father. Augustine also opposed those closer to home. His disputes with the Pelagians, as we have seen, forced him to explain and interpret passages from Ambrose and Chrysostom in order to demonstrate that they were pillars of catholic orthodoxy and not supporters of Pelagius. Similarly, Augustine contended with the Donatists over what constituted, on one level, authentic African Christianity. Here the debate always found its way to a proper understanding of Cyprian and his more colorful statements on the Church and baptism.⁵⁶ Such statements led Cyprian, as we have noted, to argue that no heretic could administer a catholic baptism. It was at such critical moments as these that Augustine found the limit of his ability to explain away troubling statements by the Fathers, even Fathers as revered as the great Cyprian, about whom no African Christian in Augustine's day could speak casually or dismissively. On the question of baptism, Cyprian, Augustine tells us, was wrong because his teaching was contrary to the Scriptures. It is this move by Augustine, a move that must have caused a great deal of consternation for him, that Chemnitz praises so highly. From Chemnitz's perspective, his whole theological career was one staged on two fronts: against those outside of Lutheranism and those within. When Chemnitz turns to Augustine, he discovers a mentor, a person of faith who can guide him in his understanding of how to read the Fathers and who can help him navigate the troubled waters of sixteenth-century Christianity.

The historical method developed throughout Chemnitz's treatise is to begin with Scripture and then to read the Fathers as charitably as possible on any given theological question. It comes as no surprise to learn that Chemnitz attributes this approach to Augustine himself. Chemnitz explains,

Thus from Augustine we can learn with what judgment and openness we ought to read the writings of the Fathers. For he first sought out the true meaning from Scripture, and then if the Fathers held to the foundation, he would clarify their statements according to the analogy of faith, even when they said something that was not quite correct. But he did not allow such ideas to be put in opposition to the foundation. Rather, when there

⁵⁶ The Donatists gravitated to Cyprian's statements that "there is no salvation outside of the Church" or "one cannot have God as Father who does not have Church as Mother." See Cyprian, *Ep. LXI.4* (ANF, V, 358) and *De Unitate*, 6 (ANF, V, 423).

was an error in a fundamental doctrine, as in Cyprian on baptism, he does not attempt to interpret it but simply follows the meaning of Scripture.⁵⁷

Augustine's method for reading the Fathers was always to have recourse to Scripture. He not only corrected the unfortunate statements made by other Fathers by appealing to Scripture but also corrected his own statements by writing the *Retractions* toward the end of his life. Chemnitz argues that Augustine's reliance on the Scriptures as the sole authority in matters of theology was the result of too much authority being attributed to the Fathers prior to Augustine. Heretics would gravitate toward "less than felicitous statements from the Fathers" to the neglect of Scripture for their own distorted view of the faith. These practices led Augustine, writes Chemnitz, to advance the following axiom: "Articles of faith must be proved only on the basis of the canonical books."⁵⁸ It should be emphasized that this is Chemnitz's reading of Augustine's approach to the Fathers. As has already been noted, Augustine's use of Ambrose and Chrysostom in his *Contra Julianum* does not strictly conform to the method observed here by Chemnitz. Although Augustine freely invites correction according to Scripture alone for his own theological statements, the Pelagian controversy presented him with a different set of issues.

Despite the many praises of Augustine, Chemnitz does note a few problems. Augustine's lack of facility with biblical languages diminishes the value of his many commentaries and causes confusion with his theological vocabulary. Augustine does not understand "righteousness" or "to justify" in a biblical way. He assigns our righteousness to new obedience and "to justify" to the process of making us righteous in ourselves, rather than being declared righteous by a righteousness alien to us and proper to Christ alone. Augustine is also a product of his day in his hesitancy to reject prayers for the dead. This hesitancy, argues Chemnitz, was later exploited by Gregory the Great in order to establish purgatory as an article of faith. From this we learn, notes Chemnitz, how perilous it is to speak ambiguously or incautiously on matters outside of Scripture.

⁵⁷ Preus, *LT*, 33a (*Loci*, 1653, 6).

⁵⁸ Preus, *LT*, 33a (*Loci*, 1653, 6). On his invitation for correction, see Augustine, *The Trinity*, trans. Edmund Hill, WSA 1/5, L1.5-6 (68-69). Similarly, in the prologue to Book Three, Augustine writes: "The reader will not, I trust, be fonder of me than of Catholic faith, nor the critic of himself than of Catholic truth. To the first I say: 'Do not show my works the same deference as the canonical scriptures. Whatever you find in scripture that you used not to believe, why, believe it instantly. But whatever you find in my works that you did not hitherto regard as certain, then unless I have really convinced you that it is certain, continue to have your doubts about it'" (*The Trinity*, 128).

III. Conclusions

There are a number of conclusions to draw concerning Chemnitz's exposure to the Fathers at this early stage of his pastoral and theological career. First, he demonstrates greater familiarity with texts in Latin than in Greek. Second, his commentary on these various early Church writers suggests that his access to the Fathers was not always through direct reading of their works—though he certainly did this to an extent. Chemnitz is indebted to the works of others in understanding the challenges raised by the Fathers. His comments on Ignatius and Hilary reveal this plainly.

Third, we discern from this early treatise what topics are of great theological interest to the young Chemnitz. Nearly every comment makes some reference to justification by faith, good works, free-will, or original sin. Put another way, Chemnitz measures every Church Father against the Lutheran commitment to justification by grace through faith alone.⁵⁹ We should not be surprised by this. Chemnitz has already had a taste of the theological struggles over the article of justification during his confrontation with Andreas Osiander at Königsberg. His treatise on the Fathers, published two years after this confrontation, demonstrates very clearly that although the young Chemnitz has only a limited knowledge of the Fathers, he has a solid grounding in and appreciation of the centrality of the article of justification in the task of the theologian and historian.

Despite the fact that Chemnitz reads the Fathers along this sixteenth-century polemical trajectory at this early stage of his career, he already displays a sophisticated understanding of history and the historical reception of the Fathers that attends to their own theological circumstance and context. He not only recognizes the various problems and challenges presented to the astute reader in dealing with apocryphal works, interpolated texts, or unacceptable theological opinions in normative writers but also demonstrates skill and sensitivity in reading these varied works that moves him beyond the narrow confines of polemical and apologetic reading. By approaching the Fathers in this constructive way, the young Chemnitz is able to read the witnesses who have gone before him with generosity and humility. This final virtue is of particular importance. If the Fathers, the giants of the past, could, at times, speak too

⁵⁹ Cf. Carl L. Beckwith, "Martin Chemnitz's Use of the Church Fathers in his *Locus on Justification*," *CTQ* 68 (2004): 271-290. On the relationship between justification and sanctification in Chemnitz's thought, see Carl L. Beckwith, "Looking into the Heart of Missouri: Justification, Sanctification, and the Third Use of the Law," *CTQ* 69 (2005): 297-302.

casually on theological issues, how much more likely are we, who stand on the shoulders of these giants, to do the same? Theology is a discipline not for the proud but the humble. Chemnitz learns this lesson very early on and displays it in his first published work.