

SWITCHFOOT *and* Saint AUGUSTINE

“THERE’S GOT TO BE SOMETHING MORE
THAN WHAT I’M LIVING FOR”

BY DAVID NAUGLE



Jon Foreman has a genuine rock-and-roll soul. Nobody can say—or sing, actually—“yeah” in a song like he can. If you don’t believe me, just check out “Blinding Light” or “Rise Above It” on Switchfoot’s 2011 album *Vice Verses*. Or listen to the repetition of the word “fly” at the end of the first stanza of their hit song “Meant to Live,” or the second “broken” at the end of the third, or “yeah” in the fifth.

Anyway, Foreman, along with his Switchfoot bandmates—Tim, Drew, Chad, and Jerome—not only have rock-and-roll souls, but *Augustinian* ones as well. What do I mean? I mean that key aspects of the influential saint’s Christian vision, especially its existential aspects, permeate the band’s lyrics. Undoubtedly, Augustinian ideas are in the air we breathe in the Christian west. So it’s not surprising that this band of believers conveys some of his sentiments. In Switchfoot’s case, Augustine-isms are probably present in their canon of music in both conscious and unconscious ways. Their songs, it seems, are essentially unsermonic, Augustinian-like sermons—tracks for thinking believers who have a faith that seeks understanding.

In one tune, the reference to Augustine couldn’t be more direct. Consider these lines from “Something More” (subtitled “Augustine’s *Confessions*”) from the 1999 album *New Way to be Human*:

Augustine just woke up with a broken heart

All this time he's never been awake
before

At thirty-one his whole world is a question mark
All this time he's never been awake
before

Watching dreams that he once had
Feed the flame inside his head
In a quiet desperation of the emptiness he
says . . .

“There's got to be something more than
what I'm living for
I'm crying out to You.”

Here they tell Augustine's story from the *Confessions* in a musically succinct, Switchfootish way. It concludes with a somewhat cryptic reference to Augustine's own conversion in sung, but whispered words that are applicable to us all, every day.

Hey, I give it all away, nothing I was holding back remains.
Hey, I give it all away, looking for the grace of God today.

Listen to this song all the way through. You'll love it. In other Switchfoot tunes, the Augustinian references are more implicit than obvious, like the familiar lines from “Meant to Live” (from 2003's *Beautiful Letdown*) that might be ringing in your head right about now. Have you fumbled your confidence? Do you feel as if life has passed you by? Are you in need of more than just arguments in search for truth? Are you sick and tired of your failures in trying to fly (so to speak)? Do you feel bent and broken? Don't you want more than this world's got to offer? Wouldn't you like a second try?

We were meant to live for so much more
Have we lost ourselves?

Somewhere we live inside

Bulls-eye! Jesus himself said it: “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10b). Augustine the Saint follows suit. So does Switchfoot. We were meant to live—abundantly!

Of course, I am supposing that you know something about Augustine's basic ideas, especially his more spiritually oriented ones. However, I shouldn't assume, should I?

What was Augustine's basic outlook? Essentially, he believed that God made us for Himself, and we are restless until our hearts find their rest in Him. Sound familiar? It should. This is, essentially, Augustine's most famous quote from the opening paragraph in the *Confessions*—Augustine's famed spiritual autobiography, and one of the classics. Make sure you read it if you haven't already. Read some of his other noted works, like *City of God*, if you can. You'll be amply rewarded.

If we break Augustine's ideas down just a bit further, we can say he believed that (1) because of our fallen, sinful condition, we experience horrible emptiness and pain, and are constantly in search of happiness and peace, so (2) we attach our loves, affections, and desires to people, places, and things we think will bring the urgently needed contentment, and yet (3) all these items we love so enthusiastically for happiness's sake let us down (but it's a “beautiful letdown”), and thus (4) it's only by the grace of God we are brought back to him so that he becomes the true source of our rest and happiness, and as a result, (5) we undergo a radical transformation in mind, heart, and life with new insight and a reordering of our loves and lives to discover true fulfillment.

This last part of the process can also be called “sanctification” and “discipleship”—for, indeed, by these means we discover the new

and only way to be truly human. I find each of these themes (an abundance of them, actually) in Switchfoot's music—they are a consciously and instinctively Augustinian band.

For example, one thing that Switchfoot never tires of singing about is our brokenness and pain. God made us for himself—to love him supremely and others like ourselves. We rebelled against him and his superlative, Edenic plan for our lives. In our state of rebellion, we experience unspeakable ignorance and disorder, in personal and cosmic ways.

I don't know what love is
And I don't know who I am ...
("Chem 6a" from *Legend of Chin*, 1997)

Where is God in the city life?
Where is God in the city light?
Where is God in the earthquake?
Where is God in the genocide?

Where are you in my broken heart?
Everything seems to fall apart
Everything feels rusted over
Tell me that you're there.

("Vice Verses" from *Vice Verses*, 2011)

We awaken to the fact that we are in the "infinite cold" and begin to feel how "needy" we are. Or if you prefer a different metaphor, we are on a plane at sunset "with nowhere to land." Do we see anything around us that could ever make us "happy"? All our "sandcastles" collapse. These lines are from the songs "Hope" and "Let that Be Enough" from *New Way to be Human* (1999).

In all of their music, Switchfoot intones that we are "defeated," "stuck," "frozen," "lonely," "empty," "bleeding," "weak," and "dead"—in other words, incomplete and restless. Yet in their songs there is also a hint of real hope. Sounds rather Augustinian, doesn't it? It's

biblical, actually.

Incomplete
Where will you find yourself?

Incomplete

Where will you lose yourself?

'Cause you're the missing person now

Step outside your doubts and let yourself be found.

("Incomplete," from *New Way to be Human*, 1999)

I am the raindrop falling down
Always longing for the deeper ground
I am the broken, breaking seas
Even my blood finds ways to bleed . . .

I am restless, I am restless, I am restless
I'm looking for you
I am restless
I run like the ocean to find your shore
I'm looking for you.

("Restless," from *Vice Verses*, 2011)

Given the desperation of our situation, it's no wonder that we search for contentment so *urgently*. As I investigate this sense of urgency in my own book *Reordered Love, Reordered Lives*, I ask: "Is it him? Is it her? Is it this? Is it that? Is it here? Is it there? Is it now? Is it then? What is it? Where is it?" With our overwhelming needs and desires, we attach our loves and affections to a variety of people, or places, or things—actually, to all of the above—in hopes of finding happiness. In the process of "trying to be always trying" ("Incomplete" from *New Way to be Human*, 1999), and in wondering "what direction" ("Faust, Midas, and Myself" from *Oh! Gravity.*, 2006) to take at life's intersections, however, we make a mess of love and the world itself as a result. Who do we have to blame except ourselves? The disorder is omnipresent.

Look what a mess we've made of love

Look what a mess we've made
 We've got ourselves to blame
 Look what a bomb we've made of love.

("Ammunition," from *Beautiful Letdown*, 2003)

We love many different things in our strenuous and sustained efforts to find *satisfaction*, which we find virtually impossible to get—oops, that's the Rolling Stones. Unfortunately, however, even very good things will disappoint us if we depend on them too much, if we live as if they are the keys to our happiness. Creation and all created things, without the Creator in the picture, amount to zero. The Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes has been pointing this out for centuries: "Vanity of vanities, futilities of futilities" (1:2; 12:8). This is also why Jesus asked what it would profit us to gain the whole world, if in the process, we forfeited our very souls (Mark 8:36). It's so common, but we still don't find what we are looking for (oops, that's U2). We're absolutely crazy and headed for a meltdown if we don't learn how to love things *as things*, places *as places*, and people *as people* (see Augustine's *Confessions* 4.7)—and God *as God*. How great, then, is our need to cultivate "ordinate affections" and "just sentiments," as C. S. Lewis said in *The Abolition of Man*.

So even if your disappointment is deep and cynicism is lurking nearby, it just might be the best thing that has ever happened to you—if it causes you to turn to Jesus. Even if the letdown is exceedingly painful and despair closes in, it can be extraordinarily beautiful—if it causes you to look up to the Lord after you've hit bottom. Augustine obviously thought so. So did Lewis. Pain is a megaphone to get us to listen. Now hear Switchfoot on the matter.

It was a beautiful letdown
 When I crashed and burned

When I found myself alone, unknown,
 and hurt.

It was a beautiful letdown the day I knew
 That all the riches this world had to offer
 me would never do.

("Beautiful Letdown," from *Beautiful Letdown*, 2003)

Augustine propped himself up on sex, but it let him down in his own quest for happiness. We try the same thing today since sex is "easier than love"—easier than *real* love—as Switchfoot has pointed out.

She [sex] is easier than love,
 Is easier than life,
 Is easier to fake and smile and bribe,
 It's easier to leave, it's easier to lie,
 It's harder to face ourselves at night,
 Feeling alone, what have we done?
 What is the monster we've become?
 Where is my soul? . . . Numb.

("Easier than Love," from *Oh! Gravity*, 2006)

Or perhaps we love money the most. Yet, as Augustine affirmed, earthly riches by themselves can actually cause us to be quite poor. "All abundance I have which is not my God," he wrote, "is poverty" (*Confessions* 13.8). Without God, Augustine recognized that everything was really nothing—that nothing was sound. Likewise, Switchfoot comments, "A heart that's made of gold can't really beat at all" ("Faust, Midas, and Myself" from *Oh! Gravity*, 2006).

The Augustinian and Switchfootian assumption is that we human beings are essentially lovers and we're searching for happiness on the basis of our loves. Their unified point is that if we trust *exclusively* in sex, money, or something else, say, achievement—the lusts of the flesh, eyes, and boastful pride of life (1

John 2:16)—in order to find fulfillment, we will be disappointed and let down, end of story. Indeed, our hearts will be restless until they rest in him. Furthermore, if our loves and lives are God-less, we are merely guides to our own destruction, as Augustine once said of himself (*Confessions* 4.1). Switchfoot understands.

I am my own affliction
I am my own disease
There ain't no drug that they could sell
Oh, there ain't no drug to make me well
...

There ain't no drug
It's not enough
The sickness is myself
I've made a mess of me.

("Mess of Me" from *Hello Hurricane*, 2009)

We certainly don't wish to remain in this situation of affliction—"I want to get back the rest of me . . . I want to spend the rest of my life *alive*" ("Mess of Me," from *Hello Hurricane*, 2009, italics added). Yuppified, paltry conceptions of happiness won't do, and yet emptiness doesn't have the last word. Remember—there's always a hint of hope. We're looking "for a bridge we can't burn down." We're looking "for the kingdom coming down" ("Happy is a Yuppie Word" from *Nothing is Sound*, 2005).

What, then, but the grace of God can deliver us from our pitiful estate? Augustine knew of his absolute dependence on God's grace, theologically and from personal experience. That's why he's been called the "Doctor of Grace"—*doctor* (teacher) *gratia*. Switchfoot rightly has a Grammy, but should also be awarded a similar title to Augustine's, for they are "Musicians of Grace"—*musici gratia*.

In the economy of mercy
I am a poor and begging man

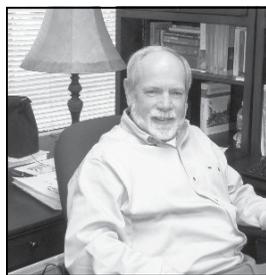
In the currency of grace
Is where my song begins

("Economy of Mercy" from *Learning to Breathe*, 2000)

What's the result of God's amazing grace at work in our lives? It results in radical transformation. Those who knew C.S. Lewis, for example, declared him to be one of most thoroughly converted persons they had ever met. Indeed, God's grace renovates our minds, hearts, bodies, and lives. It changes our fundamental loves, purposes, and desires. Augustine knew that only God's grace could move us to know and love him supremely. It was also the only thing that could move us, so he said, to love our neighbours, and even our enemies, as ourselves. It enabled Augustine to persevere; it also enables Switchfoot, and us, to hang in there faithfully—always.

And I am always, I'm always
Always yours.

("Always," from *Hello Hurricane*, 2009)



DR. DAVID K. NAUGLE is chair and professor of philosophy at Dallas Baptist University where he has worked for twenty years in both administrative and academic capacities. His newest book, *Philosophy: A Student's Guide*, is due out from Crossway in 2012.