

# Augustine's Hermeneutics: Back to the Future for 'Spiritual' Bible Interpretation?

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## ABSTRACT

*African theological students often struggle to connect the 'academic' and 'spiritual' aspects of biblical interpretation. Augustine of Hippo (St. Augustine) wrote extensively about this tension between Word and Spirit. In Augustine's view, the biblical interpreter should understand God's blend of spiritual and human means in communicating truth; cultivate a humble Christ-like character; have a working knowledge of the whole Bible; and respect the 'rule of faith' (the historical teaching of the Church). Augustine then offers methodological guidelines which sound like principles evangelical exegetes use today: be aware of how language works; compare translations, or learn Greek and Hebrew; make selective use of secular learning for background knowledge; compare difficult passages to clearer ones; consider the context; don't take literal things figuratively or figurative things literally; and pray for understanding. Although Augustine sounds like a conservative evangelical when he describes these principles, in his views on multiple meanings of biblical passages Augustine sounds more like a modern Pentecostal. He believes that a single passage of scripture may have more than one meaning, and that this is a gift from God. A biblical author may have realized that his writing could convey further possible meanings, or may not have foreseen all that God intended to communicate to later readers. However, Augustine does not promote unlimited interpretations of biblical texts. Any new 'spiritual' meaning discerned by the interpreter should be consistent with the author's intended meaning and the overall teaching of the Bible; should be in some way dependent on the literal-historical meaning of the passage; should not contradict the 'rule of faith'; and above all should promote love for God and for other people (Augustine's 'rule of love').*

African theological students face an ongoing struggle connecting their academic study of the Bible with the spiritual vitality of today's African

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churches. African churches themselves are asking similar questions. "Why," church leaders wonder, "do our students come home from the theological college with so much information stuffed in their heads, but with so little ability to tell us what the Holy Spirit is really saying through the Bible today?" Or as one Zambian theological student put it, churches sometimes think their theology graduates return to them "academically equipped and half-baked spiritually!"<sup>1</sup>

Theological colleges may bear some of the blame for a tendency to focus on academic issues rather than a contemporary spiritual encounter in teaching their students how God speaks through his written Word. At times God's historical act of divine communication is portrayed as far removed from the Holy Spirit's voice in today's world. Students and their teachers sometimes struggle to integrate the then-and-there and the here-and-now aspects of biblical revelation. On the other hand, some churches may not welcome the more informed biblical teaching that their theology graduates share with them, because it doesn't seem exciting or 'spiritual' enough. In fact, in some settings a spontaneous interpretation of a biblical passage is understood to be the 'spiritual' one, while a studied and thoughtful interpretation of the Bible is accused of limiting the Holy Spirit's work in some way. In this sense, the division between Word and Spirit lies partly on the churches' side.

However, it is unlikely that God intends for the written Word and the living Spirit to be separated. This tension between Word and Spirit in biblical interpretation is not something new to contemporary Africa, but is a challenge the Christian church has struggled with throughout the centuries. In fact, Augustine of Hippo (St. Augustine) wrote extensively about this tension in the fifth century A.D., approximately 1600 years ago. In this article we will explore Augustine's thoughts on 'academic' and 'spiritual' interpretations of the Bible, suggesting ways we can more accurately understand such interpretations and the relationship between them. The goal of this article is to help students of the Bible bring together the academic and spiritual dimensions of biblical interpretation.

## **I. Introduction**

Augustine thought deeply about the Christian faith, and his many books and letters have had an immeasurable impact on generations of Christian writers and theologians. He developed ideas about the interpretation of scripture which continue to shape the approaches of evangelical biblical

scholars today.<sup>2</sup> He was born in 354 A.D., in what is now eastern Algeria. His mother, a Berber, was a Christian. As a young person Augustine studied rhetoric in Carthage (near modern day Tunis). Not yet a Christian himself, Augustine became a well known secular teacher of philosophy and rhetoric first in Carthage and then in Rome and Milan, major centers of the Roman Empire. He was then dramatically converted to Christianity in 386 A.D., under the influence of Ambrose, the bishop of Milan. Augustine describes his spiritual journey and conversion in detail in his most famous work, his *Confessions*. In 388, Augustine returned to North Africa. He was ordained a priest in 391, and in 396 became Bishop of Hippo (now Annaba, Algeria), where he remained until he died in 430.<sup>3</sup>

Among Augustine's many writings and sermons, the focus of this article is *De Doctrina Christiana*, a title often translated from Augustine's Latin into English as *On Christian Doctrine*, but sometimes as *On Christian Teaching*. Augustine wrote the first three 'books' or chapters of *On Christian Doctrine* by 397, and then set it aside to work on the *Confessions* in 397-398. Many years later, around 426, he finished *On Christian Doctrine* by completing Book 3 and adding a fourth book dealing with homiletics. *On Christian Doctrine* is essentially a handbook of hermeneutics, laying out Augustine's ideas about how to interpret the Bible, and especially how to distinguish between literal and figurative passages in scripture.<sup>4</sup> More of Augustine's thinking on hermeneutics can be found in his other works, such as Books 12 and 13 of the *Confessions*, in commentaries such as *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* (or, *Genesis according to the Word*), and in his many sermons. Near the end of his life Augustine wrote his *Retractationes*—meaning something like 'reconsiderations' rather than 'retractions'—in which he comments on his earlier books and offers further insights from a more mature perspective. While making some reference to the *Confessions* and other works, this article focuses on Augustine's guidelines for biblical interpretation in *On Christian Doctrine*. Most importantly, we will be looking at the connections Augustine makes between spiritual and human elements in the interpretation of scripture.

Augustine was very concerned that those who read the Bible learn to interpret it themselves, rather than depending solely on the insights of others. *On Christian Doctrine* begins:

There are certain rules for interpreting the scriptures which, as I am well aware, can usefully be passed on to those with an appetite for such study to enable them to progress not just by reading the work of others who have illuminated the obscurities of divine literature, but also by finding illumination themselves.<sup>5</sup>

Augustine explains that teaching someone the rules of interpretation is like teaching them the alphabet: once they know these basics, they can read for themselves without needing someone else to read to them.<sup>6</sup>

In *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine describes first what he believes are essential qualities of anyone who want to interpret the Bible. In his view, someone who seeks to interpret scripture should have a realistic appreciation for the way God blends spiritual and human elements in communicating his truth. The interpreter should also cultivate a humble, Christ-like character, sincerely desiring to know God. In addition, any interpreter of a passage of scripture needs a good working familiarity with the whole Bible, and an awareness of and respect for what the Church has believed through the centuries. Then, in terms of interpretive method, Augustine offers guidelines which sound very much like principles evangelical exegetes today would use in trying to determine the meaning of a biblical passage: be aware of the how language works; compare translations, and if possible, learn Greek and Hebrew; make selective use of secular learning for background knowledge; compare difficult or obscure passages to clearer ones; consider the context; don't take literal things figuratively or figurative things literally; and above all, pray for understanding.

However, throughout his guidelines for interpreting scripture, Augustine focuses on the 'rule of love.' For Augustine, someone reading the Bible may discover that a passage of scripture actually has more than one meaning intended by God and inspired by the Holy Spirit (but always consistent with the author's intended meaning, where that is clear). The most important thing in evaluating differing possible interpretations is to choose the one which most promotes love for God and for one's neighbor. In Augustine's view, this sums up the whole teaching of the Bible, and provides the best guide for the process of biblical interpretation.

In this article—intended as a non-exhaustive introduction to Augustine's hermeneutical thought—we will explore these aspects of Augustine's teaching, and suggest some implications for African theological students

struggling to bring together academic and spiritual elements in their own reading of the Bible.

## II. Qualities of the Interpreter

The spiritual qualities Augustine lays out for the interpreter reflect his commitment to biblical interpretation as a spiritual exercise which incorporates important dimensions of human communication, but which should never be separated from a humble pursuit of God.

### 1. A realistic appreciation for the way God blends spiritual and human elements in communicating his truth

Augustine was very familiar with the charismatics of his day, and he knew that some people would argue that there is no need for guidelines for interpreting the Bible because they have a direct, Spirit-given understanding of scripture:

A third class of critic consists of those who either interpret the divine scriptures quite correctly or think they do. Because they see, or at least believe, that they have gained their ability to expound the holy books without recourse to any rules of the kind that I have now undertaken to give, they will clamour that these rules are not needed by anybody, and that all worthwhile illumination of the difficulties of these texts can come by a special gift of God.<sup>7</sup>

In response, Augustine points out that these people should realize that even they make use of human elements in understanding scripture. In fact, the very alphabet that makes up the words they read in the Bible is a human invention, and they probably learned that alphabet as children from a human teacher,<sup>8</sup> just as they learned the language they speak from their parents or in other normal human ways.<sup>9</sup> Augustine asks somewhat sarcastically whether Christian parents should stop teaching their children to speak their language, and just wait for them to receive the gift of tongues from the Holy Spirit, as the disciples did at Pentecost!<sup>10</sup> His point is that it has always been the case that God uses a mix of spiritual and human means to convey his message to his people. The divinely inspired words of scripture are written in common human language.

Augustine goes on to list biblical examples in which spiritual revelation and human learning are combined: Paul had a revelation from Christ on the

Damascus road, but received baptism and teaching from Ananias (Acts 9:3-8); an angel spoke to Cornelius and told him to ask Peter for further instruction (Acts 10:3-6); an angel sent Philip to the Ethiopian eunuch rather than interpreting the passage in Isaiah through divine revelation (Acts 8:26-35); Moses spoke directly with God but accepted spiritual advice from his father-in-law (Exodus 18).<sup>11</sup> For Augustine, in any of these incidents God could have chosen to do the entire work of communication through spiritual means, for example through angels or visions. But for whatever reason, God chose to include human communicators in the process. Augustine thinks God may do this to enhance the love human beings have for one another: "Moreover, there would be no way for love, which ties people together in the bonds of unity, to make souls overflow and as it were intermingle with each other, if human beings learned nothing from other humans."<sup>12</sup>

Augustine's final challenge to those who think that God only reveals his truth through direct spiritual intervention is to ask them rather humorously why they bother to preach to others: "But if he reads and understands without any human expositor, why does he then aspire to expound it to others and not simply refer them to God so that they too may understand it by God's inner teaching rather than through a human intermediary?"<sup>13</sup> In Augustine's view, the very fact that those who feel they have received a direct revelation from God attempt to communicate it verbally to others undermines their claim that God only speaks 'spiritually' rather than also using normal human communication. For Augustine, the evidence shows that God's chosen method is to combine human and spiritual elements in communicating his truth.

## **2. A humble, Christ-like character, desiring to know God and his truth**

In emphasizing the combination of spiritual and human means in divine revelation, Augustine repeatedly says that the person who wants to understand what a passage of scripture really means must have certain spiritual qualifications. The interpreter must be a humble Christian who truly desires to know God, rather than just wanting to know the Bible for its own sake: "So when someone has learnt that the aim of the commandment is 'love from a pure heart, and good conscience and genuine faith' [Tim. 1:5], he will be ready to relate every interpretation of the holy scriptures to these three things and may approach the task of handling these books with confidence."<sup>14</sup> Augustine explains that of these three qualities—love, good conscience, and faith—"love" must be 'from a pure heart', that is, loving

nothing but God and one's neighbor, rather than loving material things or other elements of this world. In Augustine's view a 'good conscience' is that of someone who knows the solid hope of being united with God through salvation. And 'genuine faith' is faith that is characterized by right living according to God's standards.<sup>15</sup>

For Augustine, the most important thing a student of scripture will learn from studying the Bible is "quite simply that he must love God for himself, and his neighbour for God's sake... [I]n other words, that his love of his neighbour, like his own self-love, should be totally related to God..."<sup>16</sup> Augustine points out that some students of the Bible miss this essential point. When such students argue about fine points of interpretation, like small differences in the translation or pronunciation of a single word, it shows that they are more concerned about being thought of as 'learned' or highly educated than they are about knowing God himself. In fact, too much knowledge of the 'signs' of scripture (that is, the words) rather than the 'things' the signs point to (that is, God), tempts the student of the Bible to become proud. Augustine warns that "a knowledge of things often makes people boastful, unless their necks are held down by the Lord's yoke."<sup>17</sup> This pursuit of academic knowledge for its own sake—or for the sake of the diploma or degree to which it leads—may contribute to the lack of spiritual vitality for which today's theology graduates are sometimes known in their churches.

Augustine makes the transition from the end of Book 2 of *On Christian Doctrine* to the beginning of Book 3 by summing up the way godly character puts the student in the best position to make use of analytical methods for interpreting scripture:

The student who fears God earnestly seeks his will in the Holy Scriptures. Holiness makes him gentle, so that he does not revel in controversy; a knowledge of languages protects him from uncertainty over unfamiliar words or phrases, and a knowledge of certain essential things protects him from ignorance of the significance and detail of what is used by way of imagery.<sup>18</sup>

In Augustine's view, it is the student's love for God that drives him or her to understand scripture. A gentle spirit keeps him from becoming trapped in unnecessary controversies or complications in interpreting the Bible. An understanding of human language as the vehicle of God's

revelation helps her deal with unfamiliar words or phrases. And a fundamental knowledge of God's truth keeps a student from being carried away by overly imaginative interpretations. In short, a heart that longs to know God keeps the theological student on a solid path in interpreting the Bible.

### **3. A good working familiarity with the whole Bible**

Because Augustine believes that the entire Bible points to a single overarching truth, specifically, the call to love God and other people with one's whole heart, he believes that even difficult passages of scripture can be understood with reference to this one great truth. For that reason, anyone who tries to interpret scripture should have a good general knowledge of the Bible and how its parts fit together. Augustine expects the interpreter to have read the scriptures—"not necessarily to understand them," he notes, "but to read them so as to commit them to memory or at least make them not totally unfamiliar"—and then to be able to compare more obscure passages with plainer ones.<sup>19</sup> As Augustine points out, this basic bible literacy helps the interpreter recognize good interpretations and guard against extreme or overly imaginative ones.<sup>20</sup>

Augustine says repeatedly that many difficult or obscure passages can be made sense of in light of the clearer ones. He claims, "It is a wonderful and beneficial thing that the Holy Spirit organized the Holy Scripture so as to satisfy hunger by means of its plainer passages and remove boredom by means of its obscurer ones. Virtually nothing is unearthed from these obscurities which cannot be found quite plainly expressed somewhere else."<sup>21</sup> Today's theological students may or may not appreciate Augustine's suggestion that perhaps God allowed there to be obscure passages in the Bible in order to alleviate boredom and provide mental stimulation! But Augustine, the brilliant philosopher and theologian, was pleased to find in scripture both simple teaching and plenty of grain for his own intellectual mill. As he writes in the *Confessions*, "What wonderful profundity there is in your utterances! The surface meaning lies open before us and charms beginners. Yet the depth is amazing, my God, the depth is amazing."<sup>22</sup>

### **4. An awareness of and respect for what the Church has believed through the centuries**

For Augustine, another spiritual requirement of the interpreter is to be firmly rooted in the church and its teaching as a safeguard against aberrant



interpretations of the Bible. Augustine speaks of this in terms of the 'rule of faith', which in his time was a concept referring to the church's collection of authoritative interpretations of scripture written by earlier Church Fathers, as well as the doctrinal creeds hammered out by church councils:

Once close consideration has revealed that it is uncertain how a passage should be punctuated and articulated [that is, how the various clauses in a passage should be understood to relate to one another], we must consult the rule of faith, as it is perceived through the plainer passages of the scriptures and the authority of the church...<sup>23</sup>

Augustine gives the example of John 1:1-2. He notes that 'heretics' punctuate these phrases to mean 'the Word was with God, and there was God,' rather than following the authoritative church teaching which understands this verse to say 'the Word was God'—that is, asserting the deity of Christ: "This is to be refuted by the rule of faith, which lays down for us the equality of the members of the Trinity and so we should say 'and the Word was God', and then go on 'This was in the beginning with God.'"<sup>24</sup>

While many African evangelicals might be uncomfortable with Augustine's commitment to the authority of church tradition in interpreting the Bible (and taken to its extreme, rightly so), there is something to be gained from an awareness of the wisdom the Holy Spirit gave our spiritual ancestors which is often lacking in today's evangelicalism. As N.T. Wright observes, as contemporary interpreters we can benefit from the insights of the past without being slavishly bound to an extra-biblical authority:

Paying attention to tradition means listening carefully (humbly but not uncritically) to how the church has read and lived scripture in the past. We must be constantly aware of our responsibility in the Communion of Saints, without giving our honored predecessors the final say or making them an 'alternative source,' independent of scripture itself. When they speak with one voice, we should listen very carefully. They may be wrong. They sometimes are. But we ignore them at our peril.<sup>25</sup>

Certainly Augustine's emphasis on church tradition reminds us that we are not the first to struggle with difficult passages of scripture and challenging theological issues. As men and women of the church have worked through these struggles over the centuries, they have sometimes

received great spiritual insight. Situating ourselves firmly in the community of faith, past and present, helps guard ourselves against strange new interpretations of scripture which might destructively lead us out of that community and away from its Savior. Too often today's preachers emphasize novelty or a 'fresh word from the Spirit' rather than recognizing that Jesus Christ who is "the same yesterday, today and tomorrow" (Heb. 13:8) speaks with a consistent voice.

### **III. Methodological 'Rules' for the Interpreter**

In addition to his thoughts about the character of the interpreter, Augustine sets out basic 'rules' or guidelines for interpreting the Bible. These would not sound strange coming from any evangelical practicing a grammatical-historical approach to biblical interpretation today. Augustine wants interpreters to be aware of the ways language works, since divine revelation in scripture is given in the form of human words. He advises interpreters to compare translations to gain a clearer understanding of a passage, or better yet, to learn Greek and Hebrew if possible. Augustine urges students to make extensive, but selective, use of secular learning, especially science and history, to understand the biblical world. They must compare difficult or obscure passages with clearer ones, and should be always careful to consider the context in which a passage of scripture is found. Interpreters should be careful not to take literal passages figuratively or figurative passages literally. But Augustine also places continual emphasis on the need for humility and love in interpreting scripture. And ultimately, he contends that prayer is "absolutely vital" for understanding biblical truth.

#### **1. Be aware of how human language works, communicating through 'signs' (words)**

Augustine calls attention to the fact that the challenges we face understanding a passage of scripture are often rooted in the difficulty of using human language to communicate divine truths. Language is made up of 'signs' (words), Augustine explains. Those signs are not 'natural', they are 'given'—that is, words are arbitrary symbols which human beings speaking the same language agree to use to indicate certain things. As Froelich points out, "Augustine realized that language not only presents infinite opportunities for interaction but also comes with its own set of problems."<sup>26</sup> In fact, Augustine is considered one of the pioneers of

linguistic theory because of his ideas about how 'signs' work in human communication.

With reference to biblical interpretation Augustine writes, "There are two reasons why written texts fail to be understood: their meaning may be veiled either by unknown signs or by ambiguous signs."<sup>27</sup> 'Unknown' signs can often become known simply by learning more. Sometimes biblical signs (words) are unknown to us because we don't know Greek or Hebrew, or because we don't know enough about the author's world to understand what a word or phrase refers to. But as Augustine points out, other signs are 'ambiguous'. We may understand them at face value, but they may have more than one meaning or it may be difficult to tell whether they should be taken literally or figuratively. "[T]he student... should know that ambiguity in scripture resides either in literal or in metaphorical usages," Augustine explains.<sup>28</sup> Book 3 of *On Christian Doctrine* is all about making appropriate distinctions between literal and figurative passages of scripture. We will return to the issue of literal and figurative meanings below.

## **2. Compare translations; if possible, learn Greek and Hebrew**

On the subject of unknown signs, Augustine stresses the importance of learning Greek and Hebrew if the student has opportunity.<sup>29</sup> Translations are helpful, but "[a]mbiguity in the original language often misleads a translator unfamiliar with the general sense of a passage, who may import a meaning which is quite unrelated to the writer's meaning."<sup>30</sup> Still, the student can compensate for this problem by checking more than one translation and comparing the different translators' understandings of the passage:

Obscure passages are often clarified by the inspection of several manuscripts [that is, translations]... It is not clear which of these represents the truth unless the versions in the original language are consulted. Yet both convey something important to those who read intelligently. It is difficult to find translators who diverge so much that they do not touch at some point.<sup>31</sup>

However it is achieved—through comparing translations or by learning the original languages—the student of the Bible should seek out whatever information is available to make unknown signs better understood.

### **3. Make use of secular learning for background knowledge, but do so selectively**

Another way to come to understand unknown signs is to make use of secular learning, especially history and science. Augustine is probably responsible for originating the famous image of ‘plundering the Egyptians’, which is still used today to describe exploiting secular resources for spiritual ends. He writes:

Any statements by those who are called philosophers... which happen to be true and consistent with our faith should not cause alarm, but be claimed for our own use, as it were from owners who have no right to them. Like the treasures of the ancient Egyptians, who possessed not only idols and heavy burdens, which the people of Israel hated and shunned, but also vessels and ornaments of silver and gold, and clothes, which on leaving Egypt the people of Israel, in order to make better use of them, surreptitiously claimed for themselves... similarly all the branches of pagan learning contain not only false and superstitious fantasies and burdensome studies that involve unnecessary effort,... but also studies for liberated minds which are more appropriate to the service of the truth, and some very useful moral instruction, as well as the various truths about monotheism to be found in their writers. These treasures... must be removed by Christians... and applied to their true function, that of preaching the gospel.<sup>32</sup>

But Augustine warns students to be selective in how they make use of such material. Augustine is concerned that students who spend too much time pursuing secular study may become proud, and he warns that “they must ponder incessantly this phrase of the apostle Paul: ‘knowledge puffs up, but love builds up’ [I Cor. 8:1].” Developing the idea of ‘plundering the Egyptians’ into a beautiful image of spirituality, he reminds them that they must stay focused on Christ, so that “even if they leave Egypt well provided for, they realize that without first observing the Passover they cannot be saved. Now ‘Christ our Passover has been sacrificed’ [I Cor. 5:7].”<sup>33</sup>

No one should think they will find ultimate happiness in secular learning, Augustine advises, no doubt speaking from his own pre-conversion experience as a philosopher and rhetor. Instead, one should approach secular learning as a means to understand spiritual truth.<sup>34</sup> In this pursuit, he writes: “A person who is a good and true Christian should realize that truth belongs

to his Lord, wherever it is found, gathering and acknowledging it even in pagan literature, but rejecting superstitious vanities and deploring and avoiding those who 'though they knew God did not glorify him as God or give thanks...' [Rom. 1:21-3]"<sup>35</sup> In Augustine's view, while a knowledge of secular history and science can be an important help in understanding the 'signs' in scripture, the student should never confuse this knowledge with a knowledge of the 'thing' the signs point to—that is, God himself.

#### **4. Check passages which are difficult to understand against clear overall biblical truth**

Augustine believes that most passages of the Bible are fairly straightforward and can be understood in terms of the author's originally intended meaning. But he also recognizes that other passages are much more difficult to understand and interpret. Most of his advice in *On Christian Doctrine* is about how to deal with the more difficult passages. One of his basic interpretive principles is that "one should proceed to explore and analyse the obscure passages, by taking examples from the more obvious parts."<sup>36</sup> In making these comparisons a good basic knowledge of the whole Bible is an essential tool and "memory [of other biblical passages] is extremely valuable; and it cannot be supplied by these instructions if it is lacking."<sup>37</sup>

However, Augustine somewhat wryly points out that some people, when they discover that what they thought a passage of scripture meant actually contradicts other clearer passages, either decide they like their own interpretation better than the clear teaching of scripture elsewhere, or decide that the Bible itself must not be a reliable authority:

It often happens that by thoughtlessly asserting something that the author did not mean an interpreter runs up against other things which cannot be reconciled with that original idea. If he agrees that these things are true and certain, his original interpretation could not possibly be true, and by cherishing his own idea he comes in some strange way to be more displeased with scripture than with himself.<sup>38</sup>

Augustine warns, "If he encourages this evil to spread it will be his downfall."<sup>39</sup> In all cases, the preacher must be controlled by the Bible, not the Bible by the preacher.

## 5. Consider the context

Augustine gives the very practical advice that if more than one interpretation of a passage seems possible—and if the possible interpretations don't contradict the 'rule of faith'—the primary way to decide between them is to look at the context in which the verse is found:

But if both interpretations, or indeed all of them, if there are several sides to the ambiguity, sound compatible with the faith, then it remains to consult the context—the preceding and following passages, which surround the ambiguity—in order to determine which of the several means that suggest themselves is supported by it, and which one lends itself to acceptable combinations with it.<sup>40</sup>

For example, in situations like Phil. 1:22-24 in which Paul's words "I do not know which I prefer; I am hard pressed between the two" can be understood more than one way (either as 'I desire both things,' or 'I desire one thing, but am obligated to do the other') and neither possibility contradicts the church's historical teaching, this ambiguous passage "has to be resolved by its actual context."<sup>41</sup>

## 6. Don't take literal things figuratively or figurative things literally

The aspect of biblical interpretation which Augustine develops most fully in *On Christian Doctrine*—the aspect which he is most known for, and for which he is sometimes controversial today—is the issue of distinguishing between literal and metaphorical, or figurative, language in scripture. He explains that:

Signs are called literal when used to signify the things for which they were invented: as, for example, when we say *bovem* [ox], meaning the animal which we and all speakers of Latin call by that name. They are metaphorical when the actual things which we signify by the particular words are used to signify something else: when, for example we say *bovem* and not only interpret these two syllables to mean the animal normally referred to by that name but also understand, by that animal, 'worker in the gospel', which is what scripture, as interpreted by the apostle Paul, means when it says, 'You shall not muzzle the ox that treads out the grain'.<sup>42</sup>

Augustine acknowledges that it can sometimes be difficult to know whether a biblical author has meant for something to be taken literally, or to be taken figuratively as pointing to something else. Nevertheless, it is very important to make this distinction. He warns, "As well as this rule, which warns us not to pursue a figurative (that is, metaphorical) expression as if it were literal, we must add another rule: not to accept a literal one as if it were figurative."<sup>43</sup>

But the challenge lies in recognizing which expressions should be taken literally and which expressions should be taken figuratively. Augustine devotes Book 3 of *On Christian Doctrine* to giving guidelines for making these distinctions. He explains his overarching principle: "Generally, speaking, it is this: anything in the divine discourse that cannot be related either to good morals or to the true faith should be taken as figurative. Good morals have to do with our love of God and our neighbour, the true faith with our understanding of God and our neighbour."<sup>44</sup> For example, where scripture says, "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink" (Rom. 12:20), Augustine affirms that "no one can doubt that it enjoins kindness. But one would think that the following words, 'for by doing this you will pile coals of fire on his head', advocate malicious wrongdoing; so one can be sure that it was meant figuratively."<sup>45</sup> This goes back to Augustine's view that the teaching of the whole Bible points us toward loving God, and toward loving other people for God's sake. However, although the distinction between what is literal and what is figurative is an essential one, not all cases are as straightforward as this example. And unfortunately, Augustine's statements in this section do not make the matter entirely clear for today's students. Because of the many questions raised in this section but not answered, R.P.H. Green notes, "Later writers in general found this the least rewarding of the four books" of *On Christian Doctrine*.<sup>46</sup>

One question is what exactly Augustine means by 'figurative', especially in historical passages. Does he mean that the historical events themselves didn't actually take place, or rather that their significance lies in some spiritual truth beyond the historical details? For Augustine it is the latter. While such passages may deal with real historical incidents, these passages should be seen as pointing to something beyond what they speak directly about. Augustine is concerned that interpreters do not get so distracted by the surface details of a difficult or obscure passage that they miss the spiritual significance by which the passage points to God himself.

Augustine gives the following example of the words 'sabbath' and 'sacrifice':

A person who follows the letter understands metaphorical words as literal, and does not relate what the literal word signifies to any other meaning. On hearing the word 'sabbath', for example, he interprets it simply as one of the seven days which repeat themselves in a continuous cycle; and on hearing the word 'sacrifice' his thoughts do not pass beyond the rituals performed with sacrificial beasts or fruits of the earth. It is, then, a miserable kind of spiritual slavery to interpret signs as things, and to be incapable of raising the mind's eye above the physical creation so as to absorb the eternal light.<sup>47</sup>

In other words, items like 'sabbath' and 'sacrifice' should not be taken as ends in themselves (although they do refer to real things), but should be understood as pointing us to important truths about God, his holy character, and his plans for human redemption. Augustine goes on to say that the Israelites fell into this sort of legalistic spiritual bondage and missed the overarching truth by mistaking the 'signs' of their forms of temple worship for the spiritual realities of the 'things' those signs represented. In fact, at many points Augustine takes a typological approach to the Old Testament, emphasizing how Old Testament events and persons prefigure Christ. "So all," he writes, "or nearly all, of the deeds contained in the books of the Old Testament are to be interpreted not only literally but also figuratively."<sup>48</sup>

Augustine makes several side points in his discussion about discerning literal from figurative passages of scripture. Those working in multi-cultural situations in Africa may be interested to know that Augustine was very aware of cultural bias in biblical interpretation. He warns against interpreting a passage as figurative rather than literal merely to avoid critiquing the practices of one's own culture:

But since the human race is prone to judge sins... by the standard of its own practices, people generally regard as culpable only such actions as men of their own time and place tend to blame and condemn, and regard as commendable and praiseworthy only such actions as are acceptable within the conventions of their own society. And so it happens that if scripture enjoins something at variance with the practices of its readers, or censures something that is not at



variance with them, they consider the relevant expression to be figurative...<sup>49</sup>

He also writes that in interpreting the Bible, “We must therefore pay careful attention to the conduct appropriate to different places, times, and persons, in case we make rash imputations of wickedness.”<sup>50</sup> He gives the example of polygamy, which he believes was acceptable in the circumstances of Old Testament times, but would not be acceptable in his own cultural context.

Augustine also includes some cautions about the nature of figurative language. He reminds students of the Bible that there are various types of figures of speech, allegory, irony, and so forth included in biblical literature, and that students should realize that these function in the Bible in much the same variety of ways they do in everyday speech.<sup>51</sup> Likewise, just because a word is used to symbolize one thing in one part of the Bible does not mean that it is used with the same sense in every biblical passage. He gives the example of yeast, which Jesus used in a negative sense about the Pharisees in Matt. 16:6, 11, and in a positive sense about the kingdom of God in Luke 13:21.<sup>52</sup>

These caveats make it clear that Augustine’s guidelines for interpreting the Bible are just that—guidelines and general principles, rather than fixed rules for every instance. Students may wonder just how to apply these guidelines, and in what circumstances to apply which one. But as he does at so many points in *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine emphasizes again the role of the interpreter’s Christian character in promoting the understanding of scripture, especially in interpreting the more difficult passages with figurative meanings: “When we have worked out that it is figurative, it is easy to study it from various angles... until we reach the true meaning, especially if we have the advantage of experience fortified by the exercise of holiness.”<sup>53</sup> The holiness of the interpreter, that is, the interpreter’s wholehearted love for God, leads the interpreter toward biblical truth.

## 7. Above all, pray!

Along these lines, prayer is Augustine’s final word of advice for those who want to know what the Bible means:

[S]tudents of our revered scriptures must be taught to recognize the various kinds of expressions in holy scripture, to notice and memorize the ways in which it tends to say things, and especially—this is

paramount, and absolutely vital—to pray for understanding. In the literature which they study they read that ‘God gives wisdom, and from his face there is knowledge and understanding’ [Prov. 2:6], and it is from him too that they have received even their commitment to study, provided that it is accompanied by holiness.<sup>54</sup>

In his *Confessions*, Augustine himself prays, “May your scriptures be my pure delight, so that I am not deceived in them and do not lead others astray in interpreting them... O Lord, bring me to perfection and reveal to me the meaning of these pages.”<sup>55</sup>

On the one hand, students must be taught how scripture ‘works’ so that they can read it knowledgeably. On the other hand, it is “paramount” and “absolutely vital” that one continually pray for spiritual understanding, and in fact personal transformation, in order to interpret scripture. It is in this way that both study and holiness come together for the student of the Bible—and each comes from God. As Francis Watson observes regarding the human and spiritual dimensions of Augustine’s hermeneutical rules, “Augustine at no point suggests that these items are in competition with one another.” Watson explains:

For example, he does not argue that an expertise in textual criticism, while all very well in its way, pales into insignificance in comparison with the fear of the Lord, which is the beginning of wisdom. He does not suggest that secular or technical aspects of biblical interpretation may safely be overlooked by those who see (and rightly so!) only the text’s spiritual sense... Augustine everywhere assumes that texts embody an author’s communication intentions and that it is the task of interpretation to clarify these.<sup>56</sup>

However, Watson also points out that in Augustine’s view, trying to determine a biblical author’s intention “in no way inhibits the semantic abundance intended and disclosed by the Holy Spirit, beyond what was consciously intended by the human author.”<sup>57</sup> It is Augustine’s understanding of this ‘semantic abundance,’ the idea that a biblical passage can have more than one meaning, to which we now turn.

#### **IV. Multiple Meanings in Scripture**

Augustine may sound like a conservative evangelical when he describes the ‘rules’ of biblical interpretation, but when it comes to his views on

multiple meanings of a biblical passage he begins to sound more like a modern Pentecostal. At the least, Augustine's insights regarding multiple meanings in scripture may be helpful to African theological students who find that many people in their churches assume that biblical passages have more than one meaning, but who also find that this topic is not fully dealt with in their theological studies.

### **1. Can God intend a passage of the Bible to have more than one meaning?**

In what may be the most controversial aspect of his approach to interpreting the Bible, Augustine has no problem with the idea that a single passage of scripture may have multiple meanings, even beyond what the original author knowingly communicated. In fact, he suggests that this multiplicity of meanings may have been planned and implemented by the Holy Spirit as a "generous and bountiful gift from God" for our benefit:

Perhaps the author too saw that very meaning in the words which we are trying to understand. Certainly the spirit of God who worked through the author foresaw without any doubt that it would present itself to a reader or listener, or rather planned that it should present itself, because it too is based on the truth. Could God have built into the divine eloquence a more generous or bountiful gift that the possibility of understanding the same words in several ways, all of them deriving confirmation from other no less divinely inspired passages?<sup>58</sup>

What did these multiple meanings look like for Augustine? In his own exegesis, Augustine often took a highly allegorical approach, interpreting individual elements in a biblical text as symbols for other spiritual truths. Augustine's treatment of the parable of the Good Samaritan in his *Questions on the Gospels*, in which he sees the beaten man as representing Adam and the Samaritan as Christ, is justly infamous. However, it must be remembered that Augustine was still in some sense a child of his times, and that this was the nearly universal understanding of this parable among patristic writers.<sup>59</sup> In *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine first offers a more straightforward ethical interpretation of the parable in which he affirms that "it is clear that we should understand by our neighbour the person to whom an act of compassion is due if he needs it."<sup>60</sup> Then just a few paragraphs later he expresses the more allegorical view that it is Christ, as the Samaritan, who gives spiritual help to those "who lay half-dead on the road"

and that in this “God shows compassion on us because of his own kindness, and we in turn show it to one another because of his kindness.”<sup>61</sup>

For Augustine, all these meanings of the parable can coexist, because they all speak of one biblical truth. As Mike Higton explains:

How can a theological reader, [Augustine] might say, take this lesson about love and isolate it from the broader theological context?... In speaking of love, this parable speaks (as its context suggests) of the one true content of the law; the one true subject matter of theology; it speaks of the self-same subject matter which is spoken of in every other theological locus... Once that fundamental unity of the subject matter of the gospel is admitted, it must be an act of extraordinary and artificial restraint not to see Christ in the figure of the Good Samaritan...<sup>62</sup>

However, Higton expresses concern that Augustine sometimes goes too far in abstracting and spiritualizing such passages of scripture, to the extent that biblical teaching about Jesus’ humanity and our own material ‘creaturely-ness’ is undervalued, and that difficult and provocative passages of scripture are artificially smoothed over. In my view, the ahistorical quality of most allegory tends to undermine the central proclamation of the gospel: that Jesus Christ entered human history in time and space, died for our sins, and rose to live again. Yet as Higton suggests, “Augustine’s allegorical exegesis teaches us to be bold and daring in our appropriation of the gospel: to hunt out connections and meanings at constant risk of trespassing beyond sober scholarship’s bounds.”<sup>63</sup> Evangelical theological students may rightly find themselves uncomfortable with the extent of Augustine’s allegorizing. But Augustine does remind us that each truth in scripture is connected to other truths in scripture, and all of them to the one great truth of the gospel—whatever interpretive strategy we may choose to adopt.

Thus, in spite of his tendency toward allegory, Augustine does not promote unlimited or erratic interpretations of biblical texts. The first test for an interpretation of a passage, even (and perhaps especially) if more than one meaning is assumed to be latent in it, is to make sure that any proposed meaning is consistent with the broad teaching of the Bible as it is expressed in other, clearer passages. He affirms, “Sometimes not just one meaning but two or more meanings are perceived in the same words of scripture. Even if

the writer's meaning is obscure, there is no danger here, provided that it can be shown from other passages of the holy scriptures that each of these interpretations is consistent with the truth."<sup>64</sup> This broad knowledge of the Bible keeps the student from falling into 'danger', to use Augustine's term. Even if the student gets a particular passage wrong, he or she will not wander far off from the Holy Spirit's essential message.

In Augustine's own view, his allegorical interpretations are closely tied to the literal meaning of a passage.<sup>65</sup> For example, he asserts that it is a "well-known fact" that a snake "offers his whole body to assailants in place of his head." This is the basis on which Augustine interprets Jesus' teaching that his followers should be 'wise as serpents' (Matt. 10:16) to mean that "in place of our head, which is Christ [Eph. 4:15], we should offer our body to persecutors, so that the Christian faith is not as it were killed within us when we spare our body and deny God."<sup>66</sup> In his extended commentary on Genesis 1 in Books 12 and 13 of the *Confessions*, Augustine does not turn to allegory until he has made an exhaustive attempt to deal with potential literal meanings of the passage.<sup>67</sup> Bertrand de Margerie observes, "Augustine clearly rules out a single literal meaning which would exclude any other compatible interpretations *dependent in some way on the literal sense*" (my emphasis).<sup>68</sup> Whether or not a student chooses to follow Augustine's allegorizing path in his or her own interpretation of scripture, Augustine would urge that the student start with as complete an understanding as possible of the literal-historical sense of a passage before seeking whatever additional meanings the Holy Spirit may suggest in the text.

Along similar lines, Augustine notes that the student is on safer ground when a fresh 'spiritual' meaning he or she suggests is clearly consistent with (but not necessarily identical to) the intention of the author of the passage, at least to the extent the author's intention can be perceived. Although there may be a number of possible interpretations of a passage—of which the biblical author may or may not have been aware—the author's originally intended meaning is the 'superior' one. As Augustine explains in the *Confessions* concerning various interpretations of the creation story in Genesis,

surely whatever you were intending to reveal to later readers by those words could not be hidden from 'your good Spirit who will lead me into the right land' [Ps. 142: 10]. This must be true, even if it were the

case that Moses, through whom this was said, had in mind perhaps only one of the many true interpretations. If this was so, we may allow that the meaning which he had in his mind was superior to all others.<sup>69</sup>

Augustine continues, “Lord, we beg you to show us either what that one meaning is or some other true meaning of your choice. Make clear to us either the understanding possessed by your servant or some other meaning suggested by the same text, that we may feed on you and not be led astray by error.”<sup>70</sup>

In addition, any ‘new’ meaning is more likely to be a true one if it lies within the parameters of the church’s teaching through the ages—that is, if it is consistent with the ‘rule of faith’:

The person examining the divine utterances must of course do his best to arrive at the intention of the writer through whom the Holy Spirit produced that part of scripture; he may reach that meaning or carve out from the words another meaning which does not run counter to the faith, using the evidence of any other passage of the divine utterance.<sup>71</sup>

If there is no obvious parallel passage to point to, but the student still feels that there is a spiritual meaning which can be found in the passage even if it may not be quite the one the author intended, he or she can appeal to reason to argue for the validity of the proposed new meaning. But Augustine warns that “this practice is dangerous” and that “it is much safer to operate within the divine scriptures”:

When one unearths an equivocal meaning which cannot be ratified by unequivocal support from the holy scriptures it remains for the meaning to be brought into the open by a process of reasoning, even if the writer whose words we are seeking to understand perhaps did not perceive it. But this practice is dangerous; it is much safer to operate within the divine scriptures. When we wish to examine passages made obscure by metaphorical expressions, the result should be something which is beyond dispute or which, if not beyond dispute, can be settled by finding and deploying corroboratory evidence from within scripture itself.<sup>72</sup>

In essence, Augustine is arguing that the Bible, with its various books and human authors, will always be consistent with itself because of the divine authorship of God.<sup>73</sup> This has been called Augustine's 'canonical' approach to hermeneutics. This parameter for legitimate interpretation is one reason why a general knowledge of the Bible is essential for the student. Certainly, in Augustine's view, the Holy Spirit may lead a reader to see a meaning for a particular biblical passage that goes beyond the meaning its original author envisioned. As noted above, Augustine suggests that this is God's "generous gift" to his human creatures. But any such meanings, if they are indeed legitimate promptings of the Spirit, will "deriv[c] confirmation from other no less divinely inspired passages."<sup>74</sup>

Above all, for Augustine, the Holy Spirit will always guide the student into a deeper understanding of and commitment to love for God and one's neighbor. This 'rule of love' forms Augustine's unifying hermeneutical principle.

## **2. Augustine's overarching hermeneutical principle: The 'rule of love'**

Augustine states what in his understanding is "the fulfillment and end of the law and all the divine scriptures":

The chief purpose of all that we have been saying in our discussion of 'things' is to make it understood that the fulfillment and end of the law and all the divine scriptures is to love the thing which must be enjoyed [that is, God] and the thing which together with us can enjoy that thing [that is, other people].<sup>75</sup>

This 'fulfillment and end' of biblical revelation is the love of God, and correspondingly, of other people—that is, the Greatest Commandment taught by Jesus (Matt. 22:36-40). This is what Augustine refers to as the hermeneutical 'rule of love'.

Kevin Vanhoozer points out that Augustine's hermeneutical rule is not the same as the attempt by some modern biblical scholars to interpret the Bible in terms of the overarching principle that 'God is love,' that is, that a 'loving' God generously permits and overlooks all human behaviors. Vanhoozer notes that "'love' is not the only model for how God relates to the world."<sup>76</sup> There is also much in the Bible concerning holiness and judgment, and the quality of life expected of God's people. Augustine is talking about the believer's obedient love for God, not 'God's love' as

license for any behavior. As Vanhoozer observes, in Augustinian terms, “‘Correct’ interpretation of Scripture means living a life of love and service to God, to the church as the people of God, and to the world.”<sup>77</sup>

Augustine goes on to make his point negatively as well, asserting that anyone who thinks they have understood a biblical passage, but who has not had their love of God and other people increased by their reading of it, does not really understand scripture at all:

So anyone who thinks that he has understood the divine scriptures or any part of them, but cannot by his understanding build up this double love of God and neighbour, has not yet succeeded in understanding them. Anyone who derives from them an idea which is useful for supporting this love but fails to say what the writer demonstrably meant in the page has not made a fatal error, and is certainly not a liar.<sup>78</sup>

In fact, Augustine says above, even a *misunderstanding* of a particular biblical passage, if it leads in practice to a greater love for God and neighbor is not a ‘fatal error.’

### **3. What about mistaken interpretations?**

This leads to the question of misinterpretation, the danger of misunderstanding the Bible because one is seeking new or fresh or multiple contemporary meanings from a given passage. Many evangelicals fear that affirming a more subjective, that is, Spirit-led experience of reading scripture will inevitably lead not just to interpretational anarchy, but to actual heresy. Others point to examples of untaught church leaders who engage in many years of (possibly quite fruitful) ministry based on a limited and often inaccurate understanding of the scriptures they preach, producing churches full of men and women who perpetuate biblical error. Along these same lines, it is not uncommon for theological students who have taken a few courses in biblical studies and hermeneutics to look back with amazement or even shame at the ‘mistakes’ they themselves have made in previous years of preaching and teaching.

But Augustine does not seem to be unduly troubled by this problem, provided that the interpreter is genuinely committed to the core message of the Bible, the love of God and neighbor, rather than to self-interest. He acknowledges that it is possible to misinterpret scripture—that is, that some



interpretations of particular passages are genuinely wrong—but that a humble orientation toward the love of God and others will keep the interpreter moving in generally the right direction. To illustrate this he uses the very practical image of someone walking on a path through a field:

Anyone with an interpretation of the scriptures that differs from that of the writer is misled, but not because the scriptures are lying. If, as I began by saying, he is misled by an idea of the kind that builds up love, which is the end of the commandment, he is misled in the same way as a walker who leaves his path by mistake but reaches the destination to which the path leads by going through a field. But he must be put right and shown how it is more useful not to leave the path, in case the habit of deviating should force him to go astray or even adrift.<sup>79</sup>

The path in this image represents biblical truth. The walker is the interpreter, who for the most part stays to the path. But sometimes by mistake (that is, a mistaken interpretation of a biblical passage), the walker leaves the path and finds himself wandering in a field. However, he keeps going in the same direction (toward the love of God and neighbor), and eventually reaches the destination to which the path was heading. Therefore, no real harm is done. However, as Augustine points out, one would not want to make a habit of doing this intentionally. It is more productive and useful to keep on the path. And unfortunately it is possible, if one makes a habit of straying off the path of well-reasoned biblical interpretation, to find oneself permanently lost.

This image conveys a great deal of grace for those who have little theological training but whose attitude of humble love for God and neighbor guides their reading of scripture. It offers a picture of how even errors in the interpretation of the Bible may sometimes lead to a biblical goal. But at the same time it warns us of the danger of intentionally leaving the path of sound biblical interpretation, it urges us to learn how to keep to that path, and it defines for us the destination toward which that path is going.

The essential element is the interpreter's heart attitude toward God. One gets the impression that Augustine might have a good deal of appreciation for the rural African pastor with a passionate love for God and for others, who teaches the congregation what little he or she knows of biblical truth, even if some of that teaching is less than accurate. Such preachers can and should be taught better methods of biblical interpretation as the occasion

allows, but there is no shame in the attempt to express their love for God through their own reading of scripture. However, Augustine might have much less sympathy for the modern African ‘prophet’—even one with a theological degree—who leads his or her congregation into misinterpretations of scripture born out of mutual self-interest or a drive for material gain, no matter how ‘spiritual’ that drive is portrayed to be.

## V. Conclusion

Augustine never forgets the purpose of biblical interpretation; he never confuses the ‘signs’ for the ‘things’, the means for the ends. In terms of an interpretive method, Augustine offers a clear view of the way God combines spiritual and human elements in biblical revelation. An understanding of the human language in which that revelation is recorded (the ‘signs’ found in the Bible), and true spiritual humility resulting in a passionate love for God (the ‘thing’ to which the Bible points) are each essential elements. ‘Signs’ may need careful study to decipher, especially if they are unknown or ambiguous. But these ‘signs’ are only a means to reach a fuller knowledge of the ‘things’ about which the Bible teaches.

In sum, Augustine urges students of scripture to develop a good overall knowledge of the Bible, and to have a healthy respect for the church’s teaching through the ages. He believes interpreters should be aware of how human language works. They should learn the original biblical languages or carefully compare translations. They should make selective use of secular learning for background knowledge. They should test interpretations of difficult passages against clear overall biblical truth. They should consider the context in which a biblical passage is found. They should be careful not to take literal things figuratively or figurative things literally. And it is ‘absolutely vital’ that they pray for enlightenment.

If it sounds to the modern African evangelical as though Augustine embodies a ‘western’ historical-grammatical approach to scripture, it should be clearly recognized that the influence flows in the opposite direction: Augustine, the half-Berber from North Africa, was the architect of western evangelical hermeneutics. And while it may be argued that he was the recipient of a ‘western’ education (that of the Latin-speaking Roman Empire), it was Augustine’s own genius, as well as his pastoral concern for the churches in North Africa of which he was bishop, that produced his unique and lasting contribution to biblical interpretation.

Moreover, as we have seen, there are elements of Augustine's hermeneutics concerning the role of the Spirit in biblical interpretation which have been overlooked by many western conservative evangelicals, but which may offer insights particularly relevant to African churches today. If a passage of scripture appears to have more than one possible meaning inspired by the Holy Spirit (and Augustine believes this is quite possible and even beneficial, especially in obscure passages which are difficult to understand more straightforwardly), the student should choose the meaning which is most likely to produce love for God and for other people, rather than promoting self-interest or a drive for material gain. While acknowledging church tradition and the overall teaching of the Bible, in Augustine's view this 'rule of love' provides the best overarching guide in the process of seeking to understand scripture, and serves as a safeguard against straying too far from the path of sound biblical interpretation.

Augustine's integration of human and spiritual elements in understanding biblical truth goes a long way toward addressing the challenges of theological students who sometimes find themselves mired in academic abstractions, and at the same time of churches who may find themselves overlooking what biblical authors desired to communicate in favor of new and exciting 'spiritual' interpretations. African theological students who struggle to connect their academic study of the Bible with the spiritual vitality they long for may find they have much to learn from Augustine.<sup>80</sup>

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Student questionnaire response, Theological College of Central Africa (Ndola, Zambia). I am grateful to the many students at the Ethiopian Graduate School of Theology and other colleges who have shared their thoughts and concerns about how theological colleges could teach biblical interpretation in ways more relevant to contemporary African contexts. Others who would like to share their perspectives on this topic are invited to contact the author at [hermeneuticsforafrica@gmail.com](mailto:hermeneuticsforafrica@gmail.com).

<sup>2</sup> “Augustine is the first orthodox Christian in the West to advance a comprehensive and original hermeneutic. [The Jewish exegete] Philo and Origen are his predecessors in the East, Ambrose and Ticonius in the West. Ambrose is orthodox, but not original; Ticonius is original, but not orthodox. Augustine’s contemporary Jerome spent the better part of his life on translation and exegesis of Scripture” (Frederick Van Fleteren, ‘Principles of Augustine’s Hermeneutic: An Overview,’ in Frederick Van Fleteren and Joseph C. Schnaubelt (eds.), *Augustine: Biblical Exegete* [New York: Peter Lang, 2001], p. 1).

<sup>3</sup> For the standard scholarly account of Augustine’s life, see Peter Brown, *Augustine: A Biography, Revised Edition with a New Epilogue* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> Scholars have debated whom Augustine had in mind as the target audience for *On Christian Doctrine*. As Van Fleteren explains, “According to one contemporary opinion, Augustine sent a copy of *De doctrina christiana* to Aurelius, bishop of Carthage, as a kind of textbook for clerical students. Other commentators, looking to the preface, fancy the work as an apologetic against local charismatics who saw no need for scientific exegesis” (Van Fleteren, ‘Principles,’ p. 11).

<sup>5</sup> *On Christian Doctrine*, preface (1) [1]. All quotations from *On Christian Doctrine* are taken from Saint Augustine, *On Christian Teaching* (trans. R.P.H. Green; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). The initial book, chapter and paragraph numbers in each reference, e.g. 1.1 (1), are those traditionally used. Additional paragraph numbers in square brackets are those of a different historical system adopted by Green in this edition.

<sup>6</sup> *On Chr. Doct.*, preface (9) [18].

<sup>7</sup> *On Chr. Doct.*, preface (2) [4].

<sup>8</sup> *On Chr. Doct.*, preface (4) [7].

<sup>9</sup> *On Chr. Doct.*, preface (5) [9-11].

<sup>10</sup> *On Chr. Doct.*, preface (5) [9-11].

<sup>11</sup> *On Chr. Doct.*, preface (6-7) [12-15].

<sup>12</sup> *On Chr. Doct.*, preface (6) [13].

<sup>13</sup> *On Chr. Doct.*, preface (8) [16].

<sup>14</sup> *On Chr. Doct.*, 1.40 (44) [95].

<sup>15</sup> *On Chr. Doct.*, 1.40 (44) [95].

<sup>16</sup> *On Chr. Doct.*, 2.7 (10) [18-20].

<sup>17</sup> *On Chr. Doct.*, 2.13 (20) [46].

<sup>18</sup> *On Chr. Doct.*, 3.1 (1) [1].

<sup>19</sup> *On Chr. Doct.*, 2.9 (14) [30].

<sup>20</sup> *On Chr. Doct.*, 2.8 (12) [24].

<sup>21</sup> *On Chr. Doct.*, 2.6 (8) [15].

<sup>22</sup> *Confessions*, 12.14 (18). Augustine also suggested that difficult passages in scripture may exist to counteract pride: "In some passages [casual readers] find no meaning at all that they can grasp at, even falsely, so thick is the fog created by some obscure phrases. I have no doubt that this is all divinely predetermined, so that pride may be subdued by hard work and intellects which tend to despise things that are easily discovered may be rescued from boredom and reinvigorated" (*On Chr. Doct.* 2.6 (7) [10]).

All quotations from the *Confessions* are taken from Saint Augustine, *Confessions* (trans. Henry Chadwick; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991). Book, chapter and paragraph numbers in each reference are those traditionally used, as incorporated by Chadwick in this edition.

<sup>23</sup> *On Chr. Doct.*, 3.2 (2) [3].

<sup>24</sup> *On Chr. Doct.*, 3.2 (3) [5]. As a counterexample of a contested passage which does not deny the rule of faith, he offers Phil. 1:22-24, in which Paul's words "I do not know which I prefer; I am hard pressed between the two" could either have the sense of 'I desire both things' or 'I desire one thing, but am obligated to do the other.' Augustine points out that this ambiguous passage "is not, on either interpretation, at odds with the faith, and therefore has to be resolved by its actual context" (*On Chr. Doct.*, 3.2 (4) [6]).

<sup>25</sup> N.T. Wright, *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), p. 117.

<sup>26</sup> Karlfried Froehlich, "'Take Up and Read': Basics of Augustine's Biblical Interpretation," *Interpretation* 58:1 (Jan 2004), p. 13.

<sup>27</sup> *On Chr. Doct.*, 2.10 (15) [32].

<sup>28</sup> *On Chr. Doct.*, 3.1 (1) [2].

<sup>29</sup> *On Chr. Doct.*, 2.11 (16) [34].

<sup>30</sup> *On Chr. Doct.*, 2.12 (18) [41].

<sup>31</sup> *On Chr. Doct.*, 2.12 (17) [37,39].

<sup>32</sup> *On Chr. Doct.*, 2.40 (60) [144-145].

<sup>33</sup> *On Chr. Doct.*, 2.41 (62) [148].

<sup>34</sup> *On Chr. Doct.*, 2.39 (58) [139].

<sup>35</sup> *On Chr. Doct.*, 2.18 (28) [72-73].

<sup>36</sup> *On Chr. Doct.*, 2.9 (14) [31].

<sup>37</sup> *On Chr. Doct.*, 2.9 (14) [31].

<sup>38</sup> *On Chr. Doct.*, 1.37 (41) [89].

<sup>39</sup> *On Chr. Doct.*, 1.37 (41) [89].

<sup>40</sup> *On Chr. Doct.*, 3.2 (2) [3].

<sup>41</sup> *On Chr. Doct.*, 3.2 (4) [5-6].

<sup>42</sup> *On Chr. Doct.*, 2.10 (15) [32-33].

<sup>43</sup> *On Chr. Doct.*, 3.10 (14) [33].

<sup>44</sup> *On Chr. Doct.*, 3.10 (14) [33-34].

<sup>45</sup> *On Chr. Doct.*, 3.16 (24) [56].

<sup>46</sup> R.P.H. Green, 'Introduction,' in Saint Augustine, *On Christian Teaching* (trans. R.P.H. Green; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. xvi.

<sup>47</sup> *On Chr. Doct.*, 3.5 (9) [21].

<sup>48</sup> *On Chr. Doct.*, 3.22 (32) [73].

<sup>49</sup> *On Chr. Doct.*, 3.10 (15) [35].

<sup>50</sup> *On Chr. Doct.*, 3.12 (19) [45].

<sup>51</sup> *On Chr. Doct.*, 3.29 (40) [87].

<sup>52</sup> *On Chr. Doct.*, 3.25 (35) [78].

<sup>53</sup> *On Chr. Doct.*, 3.24 (34) 76].

<sup>54</sup> *On Chr. Doct.*, 3.37 (56) [134].

<sup>55</sup> *Conf.* 11.2 (3).

<sup>56</sup> Francis Watson, 'Authors, Readers, Hermeneutics,' in A. K. M. Adam, Stephen E. Fowl, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Francis Watson, *Reading Scripture with the Church: Toward a Hermeneutic for Theological Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), p. 123.

<sup>57</sup> Watson, 'Authors, Readers, Hermeneutics,' p. 123.

<sup>58</sup> *On Chr. Doct.*, 3.27 (38) [85].

<sup>59</sup> See Mike Higton, 'Boldness and Reserve: A Lesson from St. Augustine,' *Anglican Theological Review* Summer 2003, available at [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qa3818/is\\_200307/ai\\_n9265336](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3818/is_200307/ai_n9265336). See also Riemer Roukema, 'The Good Samaritan in Ancient Christianity,' *Vigiliae Christianae* 58:1 (Jan 2004), pp. 56-97. To my knowledge, Augustine's *Questions on the Gospels (Quaestiones Evangeliorum)* is not available in English translation.

<sup>60</sup> *On Chr. Doct.*, 1.30 (31) [68].

<sup>61</sup> *On Chr. Doct.*, 1.30 (33) [71].

<sup>62</sup> Higton, 'Boldness and Reserve.'

<sup>63</sup> Higton, 'Boldness and Reserve.' At the same time, Higton warns, we need "to practice this boldness with a certain humility and reserve... ready always to have the irritating grit of the texts we are trying to read interrupt our smooth constructions" (Higton, 'Boldness and Reserve').

<sup>64</sup> *On Chr. Doct.*, 3.27 (38) [84].

<sup>65</sup> As Vanhoozer points out, "Augustine advocates a thorough analysis of the literal sense as a control on arbitrary reading. As such, Augustine represents a synthesis of the Alexandrian and Antiochene approaches" (Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998], p. 118).

<sup>66</sup> *On Chr. Doct.*, 2.16 (24) [59].

<sup>67</sup> It should be noted, however, that later in his life, for example in his commentary on Genesis and in the *Retractions*, Augustine increasingly took a more literal-historical approach to interpreting the Old Testament. Or rather, we

might say that as previously unknown signs became more known and familiar to him, he found more spiritual significance in the literal-historical dimensions of such passages. Froelich observes, "Only in his last commentary, *On Genesis According to the Letter*... did Augustine dare to interpret the first three chapters of Genesis 'not in terms of their allegorical signification but in terms of the events themselves' (*Retract.* 2.24.[50])" (Froelich, 'Basics,' p. 6).

<sup>68</sup> Bertrand de Margerie, *An Introduction to the History of Exegesis. III. Saint Augustine* (trans. Pierre de Fontnouvelle; Petersham, MA: Saint Bede's, 1991), p. 53. In Chapter II of this work, 'Does Augustine's Moses Stand for Multiplicity in Unity?', de Margerie offers an extended treatment of Augustine's views on multiple meanings in scripture.

<sup>69</sup> *Conf.* 12.32 (43).

<sup>70</sup> *Conf.* 12.32 (43).

<sup>71</sup> *On Chr. Doct.*, 3.27 (38) [84].

<sup>72</sup> *On Chr. Doct.*, 3.28 (39) [86].

<sup>73</sup> De Margerie writes, "In short, it is as though, in Augustine's view, the interpretation of a specific and difficult text were to assume the converging and unified mediation of a supreme Author, of Providence unifying texts, meanings, and minds of all inspired authors..., of all readers who are also believers, to whom and through whom the inspiring Spirit continues to reveal the multiple but congruent meanings of the text involved, provided they do not clash with the main sense which the human author had in mind" (de Margerie, *Saint Augustine*, p. 55).

<sup>74</sup> *On Chr. Doct.*, 3.27 (38) [85].

<sup>75</sup> *On Chr. Doct.*, 1.35 (39) [84].

<sup>76</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture & Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), p. 86.

<sup>77</sup> Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, p. 333.

<sup>78</sup> *On Chr. Doct.*, 1.36 (40) [86].

<sup>79</sup> *On Chr. Doct.*, 1.36 (41) [88].

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