

survey the *Homilies on the First Epistle of John* because these homilies underscore the christological, ecclesial, and eschatological context of Christian love. The fourth work that I discuss is *On the Predestination of the Saints*, where Augustine emphasizes that God loves and saves us not because we are good but because he is.

These four works, each approaching love from a different angle, lay the foundations for the exploration of Augustine's *Confessions*, *City of God*, and *On the Trinity*. The *Confessions* explores how an individual person, aided by friends, comes to know and love the living God. The *City of God* shows how this individual participation in the Triune God (through knowing and loving God) belongs within the broader participation of human history in God. *On the Trinity* exhibits the life of true wisdom as an inquiry into the communion-in-unity of God the Trinity, an inquiry that fosters our participation in the life of the Triune God. All wisdom, all history, and every aspect of our life find their fulfillment in God and his love.

Inevitably, my surveys of these pivotal works leave much out, and so my footnotes point the reader to the relevant scholarly literature. As Augustine would be the first to say, however, the main way to go further is to come to know and love God the Trinity and one's neighbors, through the grace of the Holy Spirit in the sacramental communion of Christ's Church. "May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 15:5–6).

1

On Christian Doctrine

Augustine's first career as a rhetorician stands in the background of his *On Christian Doctrine*, the bulk of which was composed in 396–97 and which was completed in 426 by the addition of the final sections of Book 3 and the whole of Book 4.¹ In becoming a Christian, and then a priest and bishop, Augustine found himself still having much to do with words, both as an interpreter and as a preacher. The Christian preacher receives from the Church the sacred books of Scripture, which contain both the Law and the Prophets and the apostolic witness to Jesus Christ and the Church. The books that compose the New Testament assert that Jesus is the Messiah who fulfills the Law and the Prophets. The New Testament books thus not only require interpretation themselves, they also advance hermeneutical claims regarding the Scriptures of Israel. The words and deeds that Scripture reports must be interpreted if we are to understand their historical and theological significance. Moreover, the Christian preacher cannot undertake this task alone. Earlier Christians have interpreted Scripture in ways that the Church has received as authoritative and true, and debates over true interpretation have always been a feature of the Church's life.

In *On Christian Doctrine*, therefore, Augustine offers an account of biblical interpretation and preaching. He organizes his study around love. Scripture,

1. See Pamela Bright, "Biblical Ambiguity in African Exegesis," in *De doctrina christiana: A Classic of Western Culture*, ed. Duane W. H. Arnold and Pamela Bright (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 25–32, at 25. See also Brian Stock, *Augustine the Reader: Meditation, Self-Knowledge, and the Ethics of Interpretation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 199–206.

he argues, teaches us what and how to love. To become good interpreters, we must learn to recognize how the words of Scripture direct us to love of God and neighbor. In this task we can easily be led astray by biblical passages that seem to point in the opposite direction or that at least suggest that created goods, rather than God, can make us truly happy. We can also be led astray by lack of knowledge of the biblical languages or of other fields of learning, as well as by superstitions such as astrology.² Augustine is therefore interested in how interpreters of Scripture should be trained. He knows that by a proper use of speech, we can move others to love what we love, but we can also fall into pride on account of our learning or on account of our rhetorical eloquence. Despite this danger, biblical interpreters must be learned and rhetorically skilled.

Prologue

Augustine announces that he intends to offer certain rules for interpreting the Scriptures. He briefly addresses possible objections to his approach, foremost among them the view that erudition is not truly needed for understanding God's Word.³ The Holy Spirit can illumine the meaning of biblical texts without any need for human instruction. While granting that this is so, Augustine points out that the usual way is for God to work through human teachers. Even St. Paul, after his encounter with the risen Lord on the Damascus road, had to go to the house of Ananias to be instructed, and even Moses learned from his father-in-law, Jethro. Likewise the centurion Cornelius, after being visited by an angel, had to go to St. Peter for instruction, and the Ethiopian eunuch learned from St. Philip. In general, therefore, God teaches humans through other humans.⁴ God thereby ensures that the Church truly serves as an instrument of salvation, as it would not if God taught each individual everything directly, without mediation. If we could teach nothing to each other, how would relationships of love between fellow humans be fostered? So long as they recognize that every good gift comes from God, human teachers will not fall into pride at their own gifts or into envy when another teacher goes further. In offering his rules for interpretation, Augustine seeks not to explain the meaning of particular biblical texts but rather to show how to read biblical

2. François Dolbeau, "Le combat pastoral d'Augustin contre les astrologues, les devins et les guérisseurs," in *Augustinus Afer: Saint Augustin: Africanité et universalité*, ed. Pierre-Yves Fux, Jean-Michel Roessli, and Otto Wermelinger (Fribourg: Éditions universitaires, 2003), 167–82.

3. See Gerald A. Press, "The Subject and Structure of Augustine's *De doctrina christiana*," *Augustinian Studies* 11 (1980): 99–124, at 112–13; Eugene Kevane, "Paideia and Anti-Paideia: The Prooemium of St. Augustine's *De doctrina christiana*," *Augustinian Studies* 1 (1970): 153–80, at 160–76.

4. See Paul R. Kolbet, *Augustine and the Cure of Souls: Revising a Classical Ideal* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 140–41, 152–53.

texts in general. The goal is to help the reader who encounters obscurities in Scripture, by showing how such obscurities should be handled.

Book 1

The two tasks that pertain to interpreting Scripture, Augustine notes, are discovering what there is to be learned and teaching what one has discovered.⁵ He first explores how we discover what there is to be learned in Scripture.

He begins with a crucial distinction between things (*res*) and signs. By things, he means particular realities such as cattle, stones, trees, or water. In Scripture we learn about things through signs.⁶ For example, Augustine mentions Genesis 28:11, "Taking one of the stones of the place, he [Jacob] put it under his head and lay down in that place to sleep." The stone that Jacob used for a pillow is a thing, and the word "stone" is a sign. Yet the matter is more complicated in Scripture, as Augustine immediately observes, because Jacob's stone also serves as a sign. The key to a right reading of Scripture is to realize that God can and does use things as signs. In this case, Jacob's stone is, in Augustine's view, a sign of Christ's humanity. All signs are signs of things; but not all things are signs. It should be noted that even God is a thing (*res*), although he is most certainly not a thing like other things and he is never a sign of another thing.

Treating things in themselves (and not as signs), Augustine inquires into what our attitude should be toward them. Because things are good, they attract us. On what thing or things should we set our hearts? The danger is that we will cleave to things that are passing away rather than to eternal things. But an equal danger is that we will reject created things as if we could get to our goal without the help of created things. Augustine therefore sets the following rule regarding things: "Some things are to be enjoyed, others to be used, and there are others which are to be enjoyed and used."⁷ To enjoy a thing is

5. On the structure of the work, see Christoph Schäublin, "De doctrina christiana: A Classic of Western Culture?," in *De doctrina christiana: A Classic of Western Culture*, 47–67; G. A. Press, "The Subject and Structure of Augustine's *De doctrina christiana*," *Augustinian Studies* 11 (1980): 99–124.

6. See Frederick Van Fleteren, "Principles of Augustine's Hermeneutic: An Overview," in *Augustine: Biblical Exegete*, ed. Frederick Van Fleteren and Joseph C. Schnaubelt, OSA (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 1–32, at 12–14.

7. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 1.3.3, trans. D. W. Robertson Jr. (New York: Macmillan, 1958), 9. See Raymond Canning, *The Unity of Love for God and Neighbor in St. Augustine* (Heverlee, Belgium: Augustinian Historical Institute, 1993), chap. 3; Carol Harrison, *Beauty and Revelation in the Thought of Saint Augustine* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), 247–53; Rowan Williams, "Language, Reality and Desire in Augustine's *De Doctrina*," *Literature & Theology* 3 (1989): 138–50; William Riordan O'Connor, "The *Uti/Frui* Distinction in Augustine's Ethics," *Augustinian Studies* 14 (1983): 45–62; Oliver O'Donovan, "Usus and Fructio in Augustine, *De doctrina christiana* 1," *Journal of Theological Studies* 33 (1982): 361–97.

to cleave to it with all our heart. When we seek a thing in order to enjoy it, we make it our ultimate happiness and we consider it the resting point of our desire. If we can obtain the thing that we hope to enjoy, we think that we will be blessed and at rest, so that we will not wish to seek further things. Thus, something that is to be enjoyed must be loved strictly speaking for its own sake and not for the sake of any further good.⁸ By contrast, to use a thing is to love something but not for its own sake. When our ultimate happiness rests in something, we love other things for the sake of the thing in which our ultimate happiness rests. Other things help us to obtain our goal, and we love them in reference to that ultimate goal. When we love something but do not rest in it because it cannot make us fully happy and blessed, we love the thing in its reference to what we hope to enjoy. In other words, we use the thing on our path toward the happiness that we hope to enjoy.

It is important, therefore, to know what things to enjoy and what to use. All too frequently we seek to enjoy, or place our ultimate happiness in, things that cannot bear this weight. We must learn instead to use these things rather than to cleave to them for their own sake. Otherwise we will find ourselves loving created things above God. In our journey back to our Creator God, we need the help of many things in order to reach our true goal. Augustine compares the human person to a wanderer who is attempting to return to his homeland. The wanderer needs carriages and ships to return home, but if the wanderer got attached to the journey with its carriages and ships and began to love these things more than his homeland, he would no longer want to return home. This is the situation in which many of us find ourselves; we are alienated from the homeland that would give us true happiness, because we have become attached to this world. This world is good, but it is not the infinite good for which we were made, and so it cannot give us happiness. God made it so that we, and others, can use the things in it to journey to him. By means of "the things that have been made," we should strive for union with God's "invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity" (Rom. 1:20).

The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are the "things" (*res*) that we were created to enjoy. These three are one in divinity, but they are distinct in relation to each other. Our human concepts of God fall infinitely short of God. But even though our words about God are inadequate, nonetheless we can speak truth about God. Augustine explores the various ways in which people conceive of God. Some conceive of God as the sun or as the entire cosmos; some conceive of gods among which one is primary. But we do not conceive of God truthfully in these ways. We begin to speak truth about God when we recognize that God is greater than all finite things. God could not be less than the most perfect

8. See Gerard J. P. O'Daly, "Hierarchies in Augustine's Thought," in *From Augustine to Eriugena: Essays on Neoplatonism and Christianity in Honor of John O'Meara*, ed. F. X. Martin, OSA, and J. A. Richmond (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1991), 143–54.

finite thing. Therefore he must be living, and indeed he must be simply the perfection of life itself. He must be intelligent, and not in a mutable way but supremely so, since it is better to be unchangeably wise than to be threatened with a return to foolishness. When we imagine God as a finite thing, we show that our minds need purification so as to see the divine light. This purification is the first step of our journey to our homeland, God himself. Since God is infinite spirit, we travel toward God not by spatial movement but by holy love. By our own strength, we cannot supply ourselves with such love; to suppose that we can is the sin of pride. The incarnate Son of God, however, has shown us the path of humility by which we should travel.

Still speaking of things we should enjoy, Augustine offers a brief account of Jesus Christ. He quotes John 1:14, "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." The divine Word becoming flesh can be conceived along the lines of our thought becoming speech. Our thought does not itself change, but it assumes the form of vocal words so that others can hear it. Likewise, the divine Word, while remaining unchanged in itself, assumed a human nature so that we could see, hear, and touch him. Christ is both physician and medicine to our wound of sin.⁹ He applies the cure of humility to our disease of pride. His death pays the penalty owed by sin and frees us from eternal death. Having undergone death, he had the power to rise from the dead, so we can trust him to raise us from the dead and to glorify our bodies so that they will no longer be subject to death. Since he has loved us so much, we should rejoice to have him as our judge. He has given us his Holy Spirit so that we might love each other and receive our eternal reward. In the Church, which is his "body" (Eph. 1:23), he unites us in charity with him and with each other. Those who love him are liberated from the slavery of sin and will live in glorious union with him forever. Christ calls us to enjoy him now and eternally.

Given his many friendships, Augustine is aware that it seems harsh to speak of using, rather than enjoying, our fellow humans and ourselves. True friends do not use each other for gain, but rather they share interests with each other and enjoy spending time with each other. Yet the distinction that he wants to highlight has to do with how much more we should love God than we love any created reality. Strictly speaking, the only way to love another person for his or her own sake, or to love ourselves for our own sake, would be to turn another person or ourselves into an idol. We cannot rest in other humans or ourselves in the sense of finding our ultimate happiness in them. Neither other humans nor we ourselves have the resources to give us enduring blessedness. If in this technical sense we tried to "enjoy" each other or ourselves, we would already fail to love each other or ourselves as we ought. This is so because

9. See Thomas F. Martin, OSA, "Paul the Patient: *Christus Medicus* and the '*Stimulus Carnis*' (2 Cor. 12:7): A Consideration of Augustine's Medicinal Christology," *Augustinian Studies* 32 (2001): 219–56; Harrison, *Beauty and Revelation*, 221–24; R. Arbesmann, "The Concept of '*Christus Medicus*' in Saint Augustine," *Traditio* 10 (1954): 1–28.

the dignity and goodness of human existence is enhanced by our connection to the eternal God. Seen in light of our connection to God, we are more than merely transient creatures; we have enduring existence and value. Without this connection to God, we would lack enduring existence and value. If we try to enjoy others or ourselves as if we were God, we paradoxically find ourselves much less worthy of love.

When we love others and ourselves on account of God, we “use” ourselves and others rather than “enjoy” ourselves and others. In other words, God is our goal. All our other relationships find their fullness in relation to our enjoyment of God. God gives us our ultimate happiness, in which all our other relationships will be fulfilled. God alone is lovable and enjoyable with our whole hearts, and other relationships are true friendships insofar as they are ordered to our friendship with God. If they draw us away from God, they are false friendships, since they would not then be ordered to our true good.¹⁰ Put another way, in loving our neighbors and ourselves, we should do nothing that is not also fully and truly love of God. If we were to act against the love of God, we would thereby fail also to be true lovers of our neighbors and ourselves. With regard to our neighbors and ourselves, “use” therefore signifies rightly ordered love rather than manipulation or instrumentalization. When we “use” nonrational things rightly, we are not in a relationship of love with them, since love is an interpersonal communion—although we love our bodies, since they belong to ourselves. Those who seem to hate their bodies in fact hate the limitations and defects of their bodies rather than their bodies *per se*.

This discussion of the distinction between using and enjoying prepares Augustine to interpret Jesus’s teaching, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets” (Matt. 22:37–40). To love rightly, we must love God above all, and all things in relation to God. We must love others as we love ourselves; and we must love ourselves while being willing to sacrifice our bodily lives out of love for others. Although we should love all others equally, we cannot distribute our acts of love equally among all humans on earth. Those closest to us have first claim to our acts of love.

Just as theatergoers who love a certain actor love each other on account of that actor, says Augustine, so it is for those who share a love for God. Like theatergoers who spread the word about the great actor, so those who love God spread the word about God. If any hate the great actor—or hate God—the

10. For Augustine on friendship, with attention to the influence of the neo-Platonists and Cicero, see Kim Paffenroth, “Friendship as Personal, Social, and Theological Virtue in Augustine,” in *Augustine and Politics*, ed. John Doody, Kevin L. Hughes, and Kim Paffenroth (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005), 53–65. See also Donald X. Burt, OSA, *Friendship and Society: An Introduction to Augustine’s Practical Philosophy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 59–68.

lovers hate this hatred and strive to change it. If those who hate God really knew him, they would love him. God has no need for our love; he desires our love not for his sake but for ours, so that he can reward us eternally. In a similar way, we have no need for the love of our enemies, since we do not fear that they can take away what we love. Rather, we are sorry for them since they are missing out on so great a good, and we wish for them to be able to share it with us in the communion of love. In the parable of the good Samaritan, Jesus makes clear that all humans, including our enemies, are our neighbors and are to be loved. We owe benevolence and mercy to all (see also Matt. 5:44; Rom. 13:9–10), so that we may enjoy God.

The distinction between “enjoy” and “use,” as the two modes of love, causes some difficulties when it comes to God’s love for us. God does not love us as his ultimate happiness. If we were God’s ultimate happiness, he would be needy in relation to us, and his love would be demanding of gift rather than the source of all gift. He must, then, “use” us; but Augustine immediately adds that he doesn’t “use” as we do. When we use a thing, we love it in reference to God. Our goal is to enjoy God for his own sake, and so we do not love other things as our ultimate end, but instead we love them with reference to that end. God loves his own good, and in loving his own good, he loves us as ordered to that good. God’s love of us can be called “use” because he loves us not as his ultimate good but as ordered to that good. He is the divine good, and he wills to share it with us; in this regard he can be said to “use” us, by ordering us to the good that he is. The difference between his “use” of things and our “use” of things, therefore, is that we use things as part of our journey to attain our end, whereas he already is his end and he uses things to give them their end. His use is useful not to him but to us. Certainly, when we imitate God’s love, we serve others mercifully in order to be useful to them rather than to advance our own purposes; but precisely such mercy actually does advance our own purposes, by configuring us to Christ. The reward that God gives us consists in our enjoyment of God, through which we enjoy each other in God.

If we “enjoy” ourselves, then we rely upon a created thing for our ultimate happiness. It is this pride, ridiculous when viewed objectively, that constituted the fall of the angels and the fall of humankind. Holy persons show us the goodness of created things, but they do not allow us to stop there. They guide us toward the source of all goodness, God. In this manner Paul refuses to permit his flock to find their good in him: “Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” (1 Cor. 1:13); “Neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth” (1 Cor. 3:7). The key is to refuse to place our hope for happiness in anything but God. If we cleave to created things, we turn ourselves away from their source. Even our delight in the beloved cannot be our goal. If we focus on *our* delight, we will lose the beloved. Even Christ, if we know him solely in his humanity, cannot lead us to our goal (see 2 Cor. 5:16). When we know the human Christ in his

divinity, we come to know the Father in the Holy Spirit, and we can enjoy him. The Word dwells with us in time and dies for us, but he does so not to enclose us in temporal things but to lead us, in the flesh, to enjoy eternal things at the right hand of the Father.¹¹

Scripture, then, teaches about temporal and eternal things. The purpose of the whole of Scripture is that we come to love rightly, to “enjoy,” the eternal Trinity in the fellowship of the saints. This purpose is at the heart of the providentially ordered course of temporal things recorded in Scripture. These temporal things direct us to our goal without being themselves our goal. With regard to the temporal things of salvation history, Augustine states that we should “love those things by which we are carried along for the sake of that toward which we are carried.”¹² He goes on to say that Scripture is only understood rightly when it is understood, in all its parts, to be about the love of God and neighbor. If, in trying to understand a biblical text, we interpret it in a manner that builds up charity but that turns out not to be the meaning intended by the author, we can be sure that we have not distorted the fundamental meaning of the text. Granted that it is best to seek the meaning intended by the author, we should not forget that Scripture is about love. We must approach Scripture in faith, hope, and love, and not place our trust in our own interpretations, which can lead us astray. Not erudition, but faith, hope, and love lead us to our goal of the vision of God. Many will attain this goal without studying even the books of Scripture. Indeed, biblical erudition is of no value unless it serves a life of faith, hope, and love; Scripture will not endure eternally, but love will. Since God gave us Scripture not so that we might rest in it but in order that we might come to enjoy him forever in love, we cannot read Scripture rightly unless by faith we know what is to be hoped for and loved, and unless by hope and charity we live accordingly.

Book 2

Just as the subject of Book 1 was things, the subject of Book 2 is signs.¹³ As examples of signs, Augustine gives the footprints of an animal or the smoke of a fire. Signs are things that signify not themselves but something else. Footprints

11. See Lewis Ayres, “Augustine on the Rule of Faith: Rhetoric, Christology, and the Foundation of Christian Thinking,” *Augustinian Studies* 36 (2005): 33–49. See also Mark D. Jordan, “Words and Word: Incarnation and Signification in Augustine’s *De doctrina christiana*,” *Augustinian Studies* 11 (1980): 177–96, at 192–96.

12. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 1.35.39, p. 30.

13. For discussion see Robert A. Markus, *Signs and Meanings: World and Text in Ancient Christianity* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1996), especially chaps. 1 and 3; John M. Rist, *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), chap. 2; Robert William Bernard, “In Figura: Terminology Pertaining to Figurative Exegesis in the Works of Augustine of Hippo” (PhD diss., Princeton University, 1984), 33–91.

or smoke are natural signs, but Augustine focuses on conventional signs. A conventional sign is one that living creatures make in order to convey an emotion, sensation, or idea. This kind of sign could be signified otherwise, unlike a footprint. Instances of this kind of sign include when we nod in agreement, a military flag, and words. Human language in the form of words can be articulated vocally or written down. Because of human dissension, humans have not one language but many (see Gen. 11:1–9).¹⁴ Scripture is written in Hebrew and Greek, and then translated into other languages so that the truth of salvation might spread.

If Scripture is an instrument of salvation, then why does it need interpretation? Augustine argues that God allowed obscurities and ambiguities to be present in Scripture so that those who are intellectually proud might be humbled by the labor of interpretation, and so that the message of Scripture might not be disdained because it seemed too simple.¹⁵ Regarding the latter point, Augustine recognizes the delight that humans take in similitudes or figures. He gives an example of this by using a passage from the Song of Songs to describe the Church’s ability to conquer idolatry and to bring about the love of God and neighbor. Similitudes help our minds to grasp truth more easily, and we value insights more when they are achieved through difficult labor. Scripture contains both clear passages and obscure passages in order that people neither give up nor become complacent. What is taught obscurely in one place is taught clearly in another.

The first step in the interpretation of Scripture, says Augustine, is to be moved by the holy fear of God, by which we seek to do his will. Fear of God reminds us that we are mortal and thereby curtails our foolish pride. The second step is to attain piety. Piety makes us meek readers of Scripture. Otherwise we tend to defend our vices against Scripture’s condemnation or to place ourselves above Scripture in other ways. To learn from Scripture, we must be docile to God speaking through it. The third step in the interpretation of Scripture consists in knowledge. The reader of Scripture comes to know that we must love God for his own sake, and we must love our neighbor and ourselves in reference to God. This knowledge challenges us to realize that our loves have not been well ordered; we have loved creatures to the contempt of the Creator. In fear of God and piety, the interpreter of Scripture must begin, therefore, by lamenting his sins. The fourth step is to gain fortitude. Such fortitude enables us to seek justice and extract ourselves from the love of the world, so as to learn to love eternal things—the Trinity—as we should. The

14. See David Dawson, “Sign Theory, Allegorical Reading, and the Motions of the Soul in *De doctrina christiana*,” in *De doctrina christiana: A Classic of Western Culture*, 123–41, at 130–31.

15. On this point, see J. Patout Burns, “Delighting the Spirit: Augustine’s Practice of Figurative Interpretation,” in *De doctrina christiana: A Classic of Western Culture*, 182–94; Jason Byassee, *Praise Seeking Understanding: Reading the Psalms with Augustine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 100–101, 178–80, and elsewhere.

fifth step is mercy. Loving our neighbor purifies our minds and hearts so that we can love the Trinity. When we love our enemy, we have arrived at the sixth step, purity of heart. This step involves dying to the world, so that our joy comes from the light of the Trinity and we do not allow the desire to please others and avoid adversity to cause us to turn from the truth that challenges us. The seventh and final step in the interpretation of Scripture is the peace of wisdom.

To interpret Scripture, then, is a work of virtue above all, and its goal is the transformation of the interpreter in the love of God and neighbor. The steps of fear of God, piety, knowledge, fortitude, mercy, purity of heart, and wisdom make clear that one reads Scripture so as to encounter the reality of God and to be changed into a lover of God and neighbor, not merely to become learned in words. On this foundation, Augustine turns his attention to the third step, the knowledge of Scripture. To be knowledgeable in Scripture, one must have read the canonical books of Scripture. Those books are canonical that are accepted by the great majority of the most important churches.¹⁶ He lists these books, including (among books that were later contested) Judith, 1 and 2 Maccabees, Tobit, Wisdom of Solomon, and Sirach. Having become familiar with these books by reading them, the biblical interpreter should focus first on those things that are clearly said in Scripture, so as to understand the contours of faith, hope, and love. Only then should the obscure passages of Scripture be studied, and the interpretation of the obscure passages should be guided by the meaning of the clear passages.

With regard to obscure passages, Augustine notes that words, as signs, can be either literal or figurative in their designation. Words intended literally can be obscure because their meaning is not known. In this regard he urges the study of Hebrew and Greek, because otherwise one has to rely on the multiplicity of translations, without knowing which if any of them are accurate as regards the passage in question (although comparing translations can also be of use). He warns against being offended by Latin barbarisms in the translations of Scripture, and he also warns against an overly literal translation that will not be comprehensible to its readers. He defends the authority and inspiration of the Septuagint, even in cases where it differs from the Hebrew manuscripts. Words intended figuratively, when obscure, have to be studied in two ways: through the knowledge of languages and through the knowledge of things. Knowing the literal Hebrew meaning of names and places (such as Adam or Jerusalem) can help us to discern the figure. So can knowing about things; for example, when we know how serpents defend their head by exposing their body, we gain insight into what it means to be "wise as serpents" (Matt. 10:16).

16. See Anne-Marie La Bonnardière, "The Canon of Sacred Scripture," in *Augustine and the Bible*, ed. and trans. Pamela Bright (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 26–41.

His favorite example is knowledge of numbers, for instance the number forty, which reduces to four and ten and leads to quite a few figurative meanings for Augustine. He also extols the value of musical knowledge, despite the myth of the nine muses.

To understand what pagan knowledge should be studied, we need to know how to separate what is superstitious from what is not superstitious in pagan modes of signification. The making and worshiping of idols, the practice of magic and enchantments (including for supposed medical purposes), superstitious customs such as kicking a stone to preserve friendship, and astrological prognostications are deeply deleterious nonsense.¹⁷ Scripture condemns these attempts at signifying as demonic productions and snares. Other pagan modes of signification, however, are rooted not in the conjunction of demons and humans but in the development of institutions that serve human well-being.¹⁸ These include human institutions such as customs of dress, weights and measures, coinage, the forms of letters and languages, and so forth. He is less sanguine about paintings, statues, and poetic tales; these he considers superfluous because of their tendency toward falsehood.¹⁹ Among institutions that have their source not in human ingenuity but in the order of things, Augustine especially values history; knowledge of the Roman consuls, for instance, can help to identify the age at which Christ died on the cross. He mentions that the study of history suggested to Ambrose that during Plato's travels in Egypt, Plato may have learned from Jewish books. Augustine praises geography, studies of plants and animals, and astronomy, although he warns that the latter is of little use for interpreting Scripture. He commends the practical arts and mathematics. Dialectical disputation and rhetoric are helpful but only in certain forms.²⁰ The rules of valid inference, definition, and judgment likewise serve biblical interpretation.²¹

17. See Markus, *Signs and Meanings*, 134–40.

18. See William S. Babcock, "Caritas and Signification in *De doctrina christiana* 1–3," in *De doctrina christiana: A Classic of Western Culture*, 145–63, at 152–57; William E. Klingshirn, "Divination and the Disciplines of Knowledge according to Augustine," in *Augustine and the Disciplines: From Cassiacum to Confessions*, ed. Karla Pollmann and Mark Vessey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 113–40.

19. See Haijo J. Westra, "Augustine and Poetic Exegesis," in *Poetry and Exegesis in Premodern Latin Christianity: The Encounter between Classical and Christian Strategies of Interpretation*, ed. Willemien Otten and Karla Pollmann (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 11–28.

20. See Joseph Lienhard, SJ, "Reading the Bible and Learning to Read: The Influence of Education on St. Augustine's Exegesis," *Augustinian Studies* 27 (1996): 7–25; Stefan Hessbrüggen-Walter, "Augustine's Critique of Dialectic: Between Ambrose and the Arians," in *Augustine and the Disciplines*, 184–205; Lewis Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 123–28, 132.

21. For the argument that Augustine's program for the liberal arts should be seen within the broader context of his response to Porphyry, see Frederick Van Fleteren, "St. Augustine, Neoplatonism, and the Liberal Arts: The Background to *De doctrina christiana*," in *De doctrina christiana: A Classic of Western Culture*, 15–24.

None of these forms of knowledge can lead to the blessed life, and so Augustine cautions that Christian students should not be carried away by them. Using the image of despoiling the Egyptians (Exod. 11:2), he argues that Christians should appropriate the best aspects of pagan philosophy, just as Cyprian, Hilary, and many Greek Christian writers have done. When they gain knowledge from the pagans, Christians should not become puffed up with pride. Only knowledge joined with charity and humility is useful unto salvation (see 1 Cor. 8:1). Making the sign of the cross reminds us that our salvation consists in doing good deeds in Christ, clinging to him in love, hoping to share in his eternal reward, and reverencing the sacraments. Since our salvation comes from Christ, pride in our knowledge is deadly. Our goal is "to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God" (Eph. 3:19). Indeed, the knowledge that humble and charitable readers can gain from the Scriptures far surpasses the knowledge that can be obtained from pagan learning.

Book 3

Augustine inquires further into how to interpret ambiguous words or signs in Scripture. In matters of punctuation, for example, we should follow the construction that best fits with the rule of faith and the context of the words. At times two constructions of a difficult sentence will be equally permissible. It is crucial not to interpret figurative signs literally. Although some of the Jewish people did so, they had the excuse that their signs were commanded by God and were ordered to true worship. Their signs were useful because they truly prepared the Jewish people for Christ's coming, as shown by the notable zeal of the first church in Jerusalem. The first churches of the Jews discovered with joy the full meaning of the signs of the Old Testament. Even during the period of the Old Testament, some Jews knew in faith the meaning of the signs rather than being "enslaved" to them (through not knowing their meaning). These Jews, among whom Augustine includes the patriarchs and the prophets, were already "spiritual and free."²² By contrast, due to the influence of generations of paganism, the first churches in pagan cities were not as zealous. The pagan idols, as useless signs, could only symbolize other creatures.²³

22. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 3.9.13, p. 87. See Rowan Williams, "Language, Reality and Desire," 146–47; Michael A. Signer, "From Theory to Practice: The *De doctrina christiana* and the Exegesis of Andrew of St. Victor," in *Reading and Wisdom: The De doctrina christiana of Augustine in the Middle Ages*, ed. Edward D. English (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 84–98, at 85–89.

23. See Kolbet, *Augustine and the Cure of Souls*, 146–47; Robert A. Markus, "Signs, Communication, and Communities in Augustine's *De doctrina Christiana*," in *De doctrina christiana: A Classic of Western Culture*, 97–108, at 103–6.

Augustine adds that taking literal signs as though they were figurative must also be avoided. To distinguish between literal and figurative (metaphorical and allegorical) signs, he offers this rule: signs can be literal only if they accord with the truth of faith and foster love of God and neighbor.²⁴ With regard to the truth of faith, Scripture refuses to allow us to rest in our own opinions. It presents us instead with the Catholic faith in three modes: past, present, and future. With regard to love of God and neighbor, Scripture challenges our tendency to suppose that our local customs must be right. It challenges our cupidity, our cleaving to the creature rather than to the Creator, by teaching charity. When Scripture attributes any bitterness or anger in word or deed to God or to his saints, the meaning of this has to do with the destruction of the reign of cupidity; otherwise it is figurative. Cupidity needs to be destroyed because it destroys those in whom it reigns. By being liberated from cupidity, we are enabled to love God and neighbor.²⁵

Augustine takes as an example the patriarchs' having several wives. Since this was done by reason of the legitimate need for more children rather than by reason of lust, this practice was not in itself sinful, although it should no longer be practiced today. It should be read figuratively as well as literally, however, because it is most clearly useful for destroying cupidity and fostering charity when it is read figuratively. He emphasizes that the fact that having many wives once was acceptable, and now is not, does not mean that there is no absolute standard of justice. On the contrary, the absolute standard is the golden rule: "Whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them" (Matt. 7:12). This rule of charity stands as a fundamental rule for interpreting Scripture. The literal and figurative meanings of Scripture cannot be opposed to the reign of charity. If one interprets Scripture to say something opposed to charity, one has misinterpreted Scripture. Thus if a biblical passage seems to commend vice, its true sense is figurative. For instance, when Romans 12:20 urges us to care for our enemies because "by so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head," the meaning is not that we will thereby take vengeance on our enemies but rather that we will instill penitence in our enemies and turn them into our friends.

To his rule for distinguishing between literal and figurative passages in Scripture, Augustine adds the point that some teachings in Scripture are meant for everyone, while other teachings are meant only for some. His concern here is particularly with those who, in encouraging celibacy, take as figurative the

24. See Roland J. Teske, "Criteria for Figurative Interpretation in St. Augustine," in *De doctrina christiana: A Classic of Western Culture*, 109–22.

25. See William S. Babcock, "Cupiditas and Caritas: The Early Augustine on Love and Fulfillment," in *Augustine Today*, ed. Richard John Neuhaus (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 1–34, at 31–33; A. N. Williams, *The Divine Sense: The Intellect in Patristic Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 157–62; Ernest L. Fortin, "Augustine and the Hermeneutics of Love: Some Preliminary Considerations," in *Augustine Today*, 35–59, at 51.

statements in Scripture in favor of marriage. These statements should be taken literally, but they need not apply to everyone, as other statements of Scripture show. Equally, the biblical warrant for having many wives applied only when the time, place, and circumstances required having more children, something that is not the case now. Augustine argues that the patriarchs did not have many wives on grounds of lust, with the notable exception of Solomon. The sins of the patriarchs are both figurative and, in the sense that they caution us against pride, literal.

Words that are figurative in Scripture are so by some likeness or relation to another thing. The figure can be positive or negative. For example, Jesus at one time warns against “the leaven of the Pharisees” (Matt. 16:11) and at another compares the kingdom of God to “leaven” (Luke 13:20–21). In the same way, figurative use of “lion” and “serpent” is sometimes positive and sometimes negative. “Water” has a wide variety of diverse, though not contrary, figurative meanings. If a single passage of Scripture can be interpreted in two or more ways and the intended meaning of the author cannot be known, this is okay so long as none of the meanings contradicts the truth taught elsewhere in Scripture. In working through the human author of the biblical passage, the Holy Spirit knew what other true meanings could and would be elucidated by interpreters. When comparison with similar biblical passages leaves an ambiguity about meaning, in such cases we must use our reason with utmost caution. Augustine adds that knowledge about Scripture’s figurative meaning is aided by grammatical knowledge of the various kinds of tropes.

Book 3 concludes with a discussion of the seven rules for biblical interpretation proposed by the Donatist author Tyconius.²⁶ Although Augustine points out that there are numerous passages in Scripture whose meaning cannot be found by following these rules, he nonetheless considers the rules to be generally helpful for determining the figurative meaning of biblical passages. The first rule is that Christ and the Church can both be indicated in one passage. The second rule is that the Church here and now contains true members and false members. The third has to do with the relationship between the promises (faith) and the law (works), although Tyconius imagines that we ourselves, rather than God, are the origin of our faith. The fourth rule consists in the relationship of a part to the whole, for example when something is said of “Jerusalem” or “Babylon” that in fact applies to all peoples, or when something is said of the nation of Israel that applies to the Israel that is constituted by faith. The fifth rule has to do with Scripture’s way of accounting for time, especially the use of symbolic numbers. The sixth rule handles seeming contradictions in

26. See Pamela Bright, “‘The Preponderating Influence of Augustine’: A Study of the Epitomes of the *Book of Rules* of the Donatist Tyconius,” in *Augustine and the Bible*, 109–28; Robert A. Kugler, “Tyconius’s *Mystic Rules* and the Rules of Augustine,” in *Augustine and the Bible*, 129–48; Charles Kannengiesser, “Augustine and Tyconius: A Conflict of Christian Hermeneutics in Roman Africa,” in *Augustine and the Bible*, 149–77.

Scripture’s historical timeline, for example with respect to the emergence of the diversity of languages, by proposing that certain passages recapitulate and illumine earlier ones. The seventh rule observes that some passages regarding the devil in fact have to do with his “body,” that is to say those who follow him. In the context of piety, prayer, and study, these rules will aid those who seek Scripture’s figurative meanings.

Book 4

The first three books have to do with understanding the meaning of the signs of Scripture. In this fourth book, composed some years after the earlier parts, Augustine makes good on his promise in the prologue to say something about the teaching of Scripture. He notes that he does not wish to repeat here the rules of rhetoric that he taught for many years as a young man, because rhetoric can be used in favor of both truth and lies. Even so, rhetoric should be learned, if one can do so quickly and by imitating the example of others, since eloquence helps one in the labor of conciliating, inspiring, reproving, and instructing an audience.²⁷ In order to speak wisely, however, the crucial thing is to have understood the Scriptures oneself, or at least to retain in memory many wise biblical passages that one can quote to good effect. One will also be well served by reading and remembering the works of those who have written wisely (and eloquently) about Scripture.

Augustine singles out St. Paul for particular eloquence of speech.²⁸ Lest he seem to be admitting that of the biblical authors Paul alone is eloquent, he also gives the example of the prophet Amos, as translated by Jerome. In both cases he examines passages from their writings in light of the rules of rhetoric. If the biblical authors were eloquent, why were they sometimes obscure? They thereby inspired the labor of interpreters and made clear the importance of piety for interpretation. But their expositors should seek clarity rather than imitating their occasional obscurity. Preachers of Scripture should attend to their audience’s cues, so that once the audience has understood a point, the preacher should move to another point. Once the audience has heard the truth and understood it, the goal of preaching has been attained. Until the audience has understood, the preacher has not really “spoken.” The best preaching will

27. See John C. Cavadini, “The Sweetness of the Word: Salvation and Rhetoric in Augustine’s *De doctrina christiana*,” in *De doctrina christiana: A Classic of Western Culture*, 164–81; Carol Harrison, “The Rhetoric of Scripture and Preaching: Classical Decadence or Christian Aesthetic?,” in *Augustine and His Critics: Essays in Honour of Gerald Bonner*, ed. Robert Dodaro and George Lawless (London: Routledge, 2000), 214–30; Ernest L. Fortin, AA, “Augustine and the Problem of Christian Rhetoric,” *Augustinian Studies* 5 (1974): 85–100.

28. See Thomas F. Martin, OSA, “*Vox Pauli*: Augustine and the Claims to Speak for Paul, an Exploration of Rhetoric at the Service of Exegesis,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 8 (2000): 237–72, at 249–54.

be not only direct but also eloquent, because a preacher should teach, delight, and move the audience. The preacher who delights the audience will be able to hold the audience's attention. The audience should be moved to love what the preacher says is lovable and to sorrow at what the preacher says is sorrowful. Although instruction is primary, nonetheless the gift of moving an audience should not be scorned, since the goal of preaching is that the audience assent wholeheartedly to what it learns. Augustine warns, however, against overly florid eloquence.

What about Jesus's command, "Do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour" (Matt. 10:19)? Augustine emphasizes that prayer before speaking is primary, but he also points out that St. Paul taught Timothy and Titus what they should teach others. Although the Holy Spirit raises up Christian teachers, nonetheless these teachers cannot suppose that they do not need to learn the content of faith from others.

In striving to teach, delight, and move their audience, Christian teachers will also need to reflect upon Cicero's dictum that we should speak about the thing in accord with its significance, so that we speak about minor matters in a subdued way and about grand matters in a grand way.²⁹ Matters of justice that might have seemed minor to Cicero will not seem minor to Christians. A charitable action that might seem to be of little note is great in God's eyes. The use of the grand manner of speech should be reserved for moving one's audience to a deeper conversion and love of God. As an example of subdued rhetorical style, he examines a passage from Galatians and considers especially Paul's manner of raising and answering objections to his own position. In Romans, he finds examples of the moderate and the grand rhetorical style. From Cyprian and Ambrose he gives examples of the subdued, moderate, and grand rhetorical styles. He cautions against overuse of the grand rhetorical style, because even though it is powerful for moving an audience, the audience also tires of it quickly. He also explores how to mix the styles and the effects of each style. He adds that the life of the speaker, even more than the speaker's eloquence, will influence whether the speaker's words are persuasive, although even hypocritical speakers can persuade others to do good.

Conclusion

In the Prologue of *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine responds to "Christians who rejoice to know the Sacred Scriptures without human instruction."³⁰ God could have revealed things directly to each individual human, and in some cases

29. See Adolf Primmer, "The Function of the *genera dicendi* in *De doctrina christiana* 4," in *De doctrina christiana: A Classic of Western Culture*, 68–86.

30. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, Prologue.5, p. 4.

God has revealed himself directly. But in almost every case, God has required that we learn from others. Even in speaking to us directly in Jesus Christ, God ensured that we would learn Jesus's words and deeds from others, who would have to interpret them. The divinity of Jesus Christ is mediated through his humanity, and the biblical signs that testify to him are mediated to us through Israel and the Church. The guidance of the Holy Spirit does not take away from the profound presence of human mediation and interpretation at the heart of God's work of salvation. Why did God choose this way to reveal himself?

Augustine's answer is that given the needs and capacities of fallen human nature, God reveals himself through signs so as to train us in love. Since we must learn about God through signs that have been given in history, we can come to God only within the community of wisdom and love built up by Christ and the Holy Spirit. To learn from Christ in the Church means to learn how to move from sign to thing, so as to cleave in love to the unseen God who is revealed through signs. Those whose task it is to interpret Scripture for others must employ its signs for the purpose of leading others to love of God and neighbor. This purpose does not mean abandoning the liberal arts or the methods of persuasive public speaking. But it does mean redirecting such learning toward the goal of Christian wisdom. If such a redirection is to succeed, Christian interpreters must not become puffed up by their learning and must practice what they preach. In the school that is the Church, the labor of learning and teaching is at the service of love of God and neighbor.