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**FOR THE LOVE OF GOD:**

An analysis of the hermeneutical principles and practices, and their development, in Augustine's *On Christian Teaching*, *The Spirit and the Letter*, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* and *The Enchiridion*

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## Introduction

In the history of western thought, few people are more influential than Augustine. His thought continues to impact theology, philosophy and politics, amongst other subjects, some sixteen hundred years after his death. It has been said that all western theology is a footnote to Augustine, and this is difficult to argue with. He is a man of great intellect and influence, who spoke of Scripture as the “supreme authority” (*The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, 4.14.25). That is why it is of interest to study how this great thinker interpreted Scripture. Augustine was not a biblical specialist like his contemporaries, Jerome or Origen.<sup>1</sup> But the theological concern in his exegesis has made him a popular resource for recent biblical theologians.<sup>2</sup> When asking any question of hermeneutics, the appeal of Augustine is that he reads Scripture primarily as a theologian, raising important theological questions.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jerome’s Latin translation of the Hebrew Old Testament (the Vulgate) would become the *versio vulgata* for the Catholic Church in the thirteenth century. Meanwhile Origen would become known for being the father of the allegorical interpretation and as Gerald Bray calls him “the greatest biblical scholar of antiquity” (*Biblical Interpretation*, 83).

<sup>2</sup> See for example John Webster “Hermeneutics in Modern Theology: Some Doctrinal Reflections,” in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 51, 1998, 307-41.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Norris comments that “when he came to Scripture, he came as a theologian, asking awkward questions” (“Augustine and the Close of the Ancient Period of Interpretation”, 86)

Over recent years it has become increasingly popular to look at patristic interpretation.<sup>4</sup> However it is naïve to think that Augustine's hermeneutics can be separated from his theology. Equally, his hermeneutics cannot be separated from the ecclesial situation of the fourth and fifth centuries. Throughout this study we will notice the impact of his theology and the ecclesial situation on his hermeneutics.

This paper will focus on four significant works in his later life, from 396 to 426, four years before his death. Each of these four texts provides a particular perspective on Augustine's hermeneutics. The first text we will look at is *On Christian Teaching (De Doctrina Christiana)*, which is his handbook of interpretation. This text brackets his later life because he begins the work in 396 and breaks off in 397 to restart only in 426. The next is *On the Spirit and the Letter (De Spiritu et Littera)*, which is an exposition of the Epistle to the Romans, written around 412, near the beginning of the Pelagian controversy. It provides an example of the theological insight of Augustine developed directly from St. Paul. Hermeneutically it involves a close reading of the text with a keen theological concern. The third text is *The Literal Meaning of Genesis (De Genesi ad Litteram)*, begun in 401 and finished around 415. This is his fourth attempt to interpret the first three chapters of Genesis and the most in-depth study of an Old Testament narrative with a clear example of his exegetical style amidst other polemical concerns. Finally, *The Enchiridion (Enchiridion)*, subtitled 'On Faith, Hope and Love' is his summary of the Christian faith according to

<sup>4</sup> For example, *Augustine: Biblical Exegete*, eds. Frederick Van Fleteren and Joseph C. Schnaubelt (New York: Peter Lang, 2001); *A history of biblical interpretation.*

*Vol. 1, The ancient period*, eds. Alan J. Hauser & Duane F. Watson; or *The Handbook of Patristic Exegesis: The Bible in Ancient Christianity*, eds. Charles Kannengiesser and Pamela Bright.

Scripture and the Church. It was written in 423/424. These four works will provide a range of examples of Augustine's interpretation.

It would also be naïve to present a single unified hermeneutic for Augustine without due caution. For a start, he does not provide an explicit list of his hermeneutical rules. *On Christian Teaching* is the closest he comes, but these are for a student audience. This means that an examination of Augustine's hermeneutics will always be through implicit evidence. More important however, is the fact that Augustine's mind, and therefore his hermeneutic, develops over time from the young convert of Ambrose to the mature Bishop of Hippo. In addition to his natural maturing, we will see that he uses different hermeneutical styles depending on the ecclesial context.<sup>5</sup> In our conclusion we will briefly look at how his hermeneutics have developed over his later life.

With these caveats in place, we will attempt to examine the rules and principles Augustine demonstrates in his later life. When looking at each of the texts we will examine both the practical rules that he employs as he handles Scripture as well as the broader theoretical principles that are demonstrated. We will also be sensitive to the development of Augustine's hermeneutics over this time; in particular how his communication of these principles changes in the time of his writing these four works from 396 to 426.

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<sup>5</sup> For example, the close exegetical work of the Pelagians required as a response an equally close reading in *On the Spirit and the Letter*, whilst the Manicheans disregard the Old Testament as inconsistent with the New Testament so *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* is more apologetic in style.

Behind each of the texts we will look at, there is important background that affects how Augustine interprets Scripture. Therefore, as part of our introduction we will outline the interpretive and ecclesial context that surrounds Augustine.

## **1. Interpretive and Ecclesial Context of Augustine**

There are several factors that are important to note when considering the interpretation of Augustine.

### *Latin and Rhetoric*

Certain biographical details have impacted how Augustine views and interprets the text. As a boy he was saturated in the Latin writers Cicero and Virgil. He frequently used the poet, Virgil, and orator and politician, Cicero, as points of reference in his writing.<sup>6</sup> And his training in Latin literature would stay with him.<sup>7</sup> On first reading Cicero's *Hortensius* he recounts in the *Confessions*,

Suddenly every vain hope became empty to me, and I longed for the  
immortality of wisdom with an incredible ardour in my heart. (III.iv.7)

Not only would he quote Virgil and Cicero as a reference point, but Cicero would influence how Augustine was to value rhetoric. Of course he would proceed to be trained in rhetoric at Carthage. On the one hand, rhetoric was an essential part of the Christian's responsibility to teach the Scriptures. This is demonstrated in Book Four of *On Christian Teaching*. On the other hand, rhetoric would affect the way

<sup>6</sup> For example see *On Christian Teaching* 2.136. See also Norris, "Augustine and the Close of the Ancient Period of Interpretation", 80-81.

<sup>7</sup> For an in-depth survey of the impact of Cicero and Virgil on Augustine's writing, as well as break down of Augustine's usage in his writing, see O'Donnell, "Augustine's Classical Readings", 144-175.

Augustine viewed Scripture. In *On Christian Teaching* he is sensitive to the rhetoric that Paul uses (e.g. 4.111). Some have argued that Augustine viewed the whole of Scripture as ‘the Divine Rhetorician’s communication with humanity.’<sup>8</sup> God is the ultimate communicator and we are the audience listening.

### *North African Christianity*

Augustine was installed as Bishop of Hippo in 391. Having moved from Milan, he enters a different world of Christianity and a different approach to the Bible. Milan was a place for intellectuals and high culture. However, North Africa was more rural and less educated. This is reflected in the new interpretive context Augustine finds himself in. Peter Brown describes Hippo as “a community of poor illiterate farmers.”<sup>9</sup> This is illustrated in a letter to Augustine from a fellow African bishop who commented, “God is not to be sought after by reason but followed through authority.”<sup>10</sup> The North African church saw authority before reason and this naturally lead to a high level of superstition. Teske summarises their faith and interpretation as a Church that “rejoiced in the yoke of authority and terror of superstition.”<sup>11</sup> These are the attitudes to faith and Scripture that Augustine was thrust into.

During his later years there are three heresies or schisms that Augustine interacts with. These three dictate the challenges for his theology and his exegesis.

<sup>8</sup> See Dawson, “Sign Theory, Allegorical Reading, and the Motions of the Soul”;

Hauser and Watson “Introduction and Overview”, 49; and Norris, “Augustine and the Close of the Ancient Period of Interpretation” 89.

<sup>9</sup> Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 197.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Copan, “Augustine and the Scandal,” 288.

<sup>11</sup> Teske, “Introduction” to *On Genesis*, 12.

## *Manichaeism*

Manichaeism claimed Augustine's adherence, if not his full endorsement, for the period of his late teenage years and early twenties.<sup>12</sup> He would finally find its teachings far-fetched and incompatible with what the academy was teaching him. Manichaeism was founded upon the question of why evil exists. It created a dichotomy or dualism between good and evil to explain its existence. As with the majority of dualistic belief systems, this led to the belief in a great cosmic battle between good and evil. Augustine identified the flaw that in Manichaeism neither good nor evil are in fact absolute because good shows weakness in being attacked and evil shows virtue by being attracted to the good.<sup>13</sup> It was not only this that caused problems for Augustine, but also the mythical stories that were irreconcilable with contemporary astronomy. It was in 386, at the age of 32, that Augustine left behind the beliefs of the Manichees for Christianity. Although he had nothing to do with Manichaeism from this point on, his writings and interpretation still possess a strong anti-Manichaean polemic. In particular their disregarding of the Old Testament as inspired Scripture frustrated Augustine. He would later say,

First, they find fault with the Scriptures which they either misunderstand or  
want to be misunderstood; second they parade the image of a chaste and

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<sup>12</sup> Teske describes Augustine as a "hearer" of Manichaeism ("Introduction", *On Genesis*, 9). He was open to their logic and being part of their community, but as he explored more of the doctrine of the Manichees the gaps between what he could listen to and what he could accept grew further apart.

<sup>13</sup> As J. Kevin Doyle puts it, "evil could therefore not be entirely evil, nor the good (by its vulnerability) entirely good". "Mani, Manichaeism" in *Augustine through the Ages*, 521.

remarkable self-control. (*De Moribus Ecclesiae et de Moribus Manichaeorum* 1.2.2)<sup>14</sup>

In *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* it is particularly clear that Augustine wants to defend the inspiration of the Old Testament against the Manichees.

### *Donatism*

Donatism is a schism that began around 308 to 311. Although it would last no more than two hundred years, it reached the peak of its acceptance during Augustine's later life. In particular it was a powerful force in North Africa during the time Augustine was bishop. The beginning of the Donatist movement was grounded in personal rivalries and disputes regarding sacraments. Augustine would oppose them in saying that the sacraments belonged to Christ, and not the (corrupt) priests who administered them. Much Donatist theology coincided with the catholic theology of Augustine; the major difference came from the definition of the Church and how that is worked out in practice.<sup>15</sup> The Donatists wanted to make the most of the difference between the Church and the world, whilst Augustine knew that this difference was impossible to maintain in the instituted Church. Because of the infighting and rivalry in the Donatist controversy, Augustine was provided with the opportunity to use reason rather than force to defend his position. This was a welcome alternative to the forceful and violent arguments in the Church. It would also lead Augustine to emphasise the role of love within the Church. His *Homilies on the First Epistle of John*, written during the height of the Donatist controversy, contain the famous phrase

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<sup>14</sup> Referenced in Teske, "Introduction", in *On Genesis*, 5.

<sup>15</sup> See Robert A. Markus, "Donatus, Donatism" in *Augustine through the Ages*, 286.

“Love and do what thou wilt” (7.8).<sup>16</sup> In this, it is understandable that love is such a big emphasis for Augustine in the writing of his later years.

### *Pelagianism*

Of these three heresies, the Pelagian controversy was the only one that began in the time of Augustine (although its roots can be traced to earlier Christianity). This controversy would take up most of Augustine’s energies during the last part of his life. Questions that dominated Pelagius, its founder, were centred on free will and sin. He claimed that humanity had free choice whether to sin or not to sin and therefore every person would be judged according to individual sins. This has been described as the “strong self” both in nature and will.<sup>17</sup> Hence, if a person was kept in the bonds of sin, this is the individual’s doing, not that of the human nature. Although Augustine may have argued something similar in his earlier debates with the Manichees, he later distanced himself from this line of thought. On the one hand, the doctrine of predestination would bring into focus God as the one who saves through the work of the Holy Spirit (rather than free choice). And on the other hand, Augustine would use original sin to show that humanity can do nothing but choose to sin. It is only by the grace of God that humanity ever managed to be obedient. This view would draw Augustine closer to highlighting the importance of grace in Christian doctrine.

### *The Creed and the Catholic Church*

Throughout his writings Augustine defends not only the Gospel of grace, but also its articulation in the Creed and the Catholic Church. All the works we will examine

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<sup>16</sup> See Burnaby, “Introduction to *The Homilies*”, 257.

<sup>17</sup> Eugene TeSelle, *Augustine*, 41.

demonstrate this, however the *Enchiridion* is the best example. At the time Augustine wrote there were several Christian creeds available. The Apostles' Creed, quoted below, would influence most creeds and by the time Augustine was in Hippo the Nicene Creed (325) would also be in circulation.

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.

He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried.

He descended into hell. On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.

Amen.

The Apostles' Creed provided the basic statements for most of the other contemporary creeds. In *On the Literal Meaning of Genesis: An Unfinished Book (De Genesi ad Litteram Liber Imperfectus, c.393)*, Augustine's first attempt to provide a commentary on Genesis, he incorporates language very close to the Nicene Creed.<sup>18</sup> However, it is evident from Augustine's sermons that the creed most common to him was the Creed of Milan, which was used at his baptism. The text of this creed can only be pieced together from Augustine's *Sermons* 212-214. Meanwhile the similar Creed of Hippo

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<sup>18</sup> See Teske, "Introduction" in *On Genesis*, 15 n. 33.

can be found in *Sermons 215*.<sup>19</sup> These creeds would form the basis of Augustine's Rule of Faith because they described accurately what was contained in Scripture.<sup>20</sup> When using the expression "the faith" we can assume that at the basis of this expression is the articulation of the faith in the creed.

## **2. Augustine's canon**

Finally, it is worth highlighting the version of the Bible Augustine used in his exegesis. From the *Confessions* we know that Augustine did not read Hebrew (XI.iii.5) and his Greek was very basic.<sup>21</sup> In many of his quotes he prefers the Greek Septuagint, but his elementary Greek would suggest this is not his common text. Later in life it is clear that he prefers Jerome's Latin translation, the Vulgate.<sup>22</sup> This means that the Apocryphal books were included in the canon that Augustine used.

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<sup>19</sup> For the texts of these creeds and the background of Augustine's use of these creeds see Lienhard, "Creed, *Symbolum*", 255.

<sup>20</sup> See *Sermones* 212.2.

<sup>21</sup> For Augustine's knowledge of Greek see Schaff, "Prolegomena" in *NPNF*, I, 15.

<sup>22</sup> "My text is not that of the Septuagint, whose seventy translators, though working with the help of the Holy Spirit, seem to have rendered some passages different ways so that the reader's attention might be alerted to the search for spiritual meaning...but that of the translation from Hebrew into Latin made by the priest Jerome, an expert in both languages" (*On Christian Teaching* 4.48).

## Chapter 1: *On Christian Teaching*

When addressing the question of Augustine's hermeneutics, *On Christian Teaching* (*De Doctrina Christiana*) may seem the obvious place to start. Augustine is explicit in outlining the "rules for interpreting the scriptures" (*Preface*, 1).<sup>23</sup> Often referred to as a handbook of biblical hermeneutics, we may be tempted to stall our wider study and focus on this one piece of literature. But as we delve deeper into *On Christian Teaching* we soon discover that it is more complex than a mere manual of rules for interpretation. Upon reflection, we might change our description to a handbook of Christian culture or education, as some have.<sup>24</sup> Still others prefer the broader title of 'Christian *Paideia*' to summarise Augustine's aim.<sup>25</sup> In the course of this chapter we will examine how Augustine uses Scripture, his governing principle and practical rules for interpretation.

In essence Augustine is answering the question 'how should we handle Scripture?' Scripture is the vital direction in the Christian's life and leads to love:

For 'we walk by faith not by sight' [2 Cor. 5:7], and faith will falter if the authority of holy scripture is shaken; and if faith falters, love itself will decay.

(1.89)

He answers the question how we should handle Scripture, in four books. It is important to recognise the teleological nature of *On Christian Teaching*; everything

<sup>23</sup> All translations and paragraph references are from R.P.H. Green, *Augustine: De Doctrina Christiana*.

<sup>24</sup> For a review of the competing descriptions of *On Christian Teaching* see, Gerald A. Press, "Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*", 101-107.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 104.

must serve the *summum bonum*. Rather than *On Christian Teaching* being an eclectic collection of rules and advice for young readers of Scripture, *On Christian Teaching* itself is governed by one overarching principle. Book 1 covers this general principle as love of God and neighbour, Books 2 and 3 raises the problem of unfamiliar and ambiguous language in Scripture and Book 4 discusses how Scripture should be taught. The handbook is littered with rules and observations about Scripture.

Chronologically, Augustine wrote *On Christian Teaching* in two sections as he says in the *Retractions*. We can infer that 1.1-3.78 were written sometime before Ambrose's death in April 397 because the reference to "those still alive" in 2.146 suggests that Ambrose is still alive at that point. A reasonable estimate for Augustine starting the work would be 395.<sup>26</sup> In the *Retractions* he tells us that he stopped writing mid-argument in Book 3.78 and restarted in the year 426 when he completed Book 3 and wrote book 4. These details make the chronology of *On Christian Teaching* difficult. It is conceivable that he wrote 2.146 shortly before Ambrose died and continued writing up to 3.78 after Ambrose's death in 397. Therefore, we cannot be exact about the dates of the first section. It is also possible that when Augustine restarts the work in 426 he revises what he has already written.<sup>27</sup> This makes it difficult to follow the chronology of Augustine's thought with any accuracy. In the context of the other books that we will examine, Augustine begins *On Christian*

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<sup>26</sup> For further discussion of this see Green "Introduction", ix-x.

<sup>27</sup> However, we must also bear in mind that Augustine does not revise details such as Ambrose's death (or the authorship of the Wisdom of Solomon that he overstated, as he acknowledges in the *Retractions*). And he is not in the habit of revising what he has already written, but offering corrections in his *Retractions*, particularly since he finishes the work within a couple of years of writing the *Retractions*.

*Teaching* before any of the other works (*Spirit and the Letter*, 412; *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, c. 414; and *The Enchiridion*, c. 423), but he also finishes the work in 426 once he has completed these other works. Therefore, there is the maturity of thought coupled with his early thinking. When navigating through his other works, *On Christian Teaching* provides a good grounding in Augustine's thought.

### **1. The Nature of Scripture in *On Christian Teaching***

The question of the nature of Scripture in *On Christian Teaching* is important as it opens the way to understanding the function of Scripture in the Christian's life. That is, what Scripture is will determine in what specific ways it can help the reader. Scripture has the dual nature of being the work of human hands as well divine. Augustine upholds and emphasises both of these. At different stages he notes the "remarkable sublimity and the remarkable humility of the scriptures" (2.151).

He is aware of the human and earthy nature of Scripture. This is particularly relevant to his discussion of unfamiliar and ambiguous signs. He acknowledges that,

Even the divinely given signs contained in the holy scriptures have been communicated to us by the human beings who wrote them. (2.3)

This means that there may be language and imagery that is unknown to the reader because the human authors of Scripture lived in a different time. A little later he expresses the fact that not only are the authors human, but they are writing in a particular time in history. Therefore there will be more language and imagery that is unknown to the reader. Augustine notes the ambiguity of grammar from the context

of canonical writers. This is relevant when a reader is unsure of the emphasis in pronouncing a particular Latin word. He concludes,

What, then, is correctness of speech but the maintenance of the practice of others, as established by the authority of ancient speakers? (2.45)

The point is that the Scriptures have a human element in their nature and the reader should be able to proceed through these issues without being distracted by them.

Indeed he adds,

Whether one says *ignoscere* with a long or short third syllable is of little concern to someone who beseeches God to forgive his sins no matter how he may have managed to articulate the word. (2.45)

Acknowledging the human nature of the Scriptures reacts against his Manichaeist past, which dismissed the divinity of the Old Testament and the humanity of the New Testament. By demonstrating the human element, Augustine is able to see past the unfamiliar and ambiguous language of the Old Testament to its divine nature, something the Manichaeists were unable to do.

Of greater importance in *On Christian Teaching* is the divine nature of Scripture.

Within *On Christian Teaching* Augustine shows the Scripture's divinity in two ways: its unfathomable depth and its means to gain wisdom and holiness. The depth of Scripture directs the interpreter to appreciate the layers of Scripture. This divinity not only provides explanation of the obscure passages of Scripture, but also covers the span of Scripture.

So all, or nearly all, of the deeds contained in the books of the Old Testament are to be interpreted not only literally but also figuratively. (3.73)

Indeed in its divinity is where the beauty of Scripture is held. It is the most eloquent and most aesthetic of texts because of its divine author.

Could God have built into the divine eloquence a more generous or bountiful gift than the possibility of understanding the same words in several ways, all of them deriving confirmation from other no less divinely inspired passages?  
(3.86)

Divine eloquence is also referred to in Book 4 when Augustine discusses the eloquence that the teacher should use. Teachers should emulate Scripture in seeking to “instruct, delight and move their listeners” (4.74). This eloquence is most profoundly seen in Scripture.

...not only can I conceive of nothing wiser; I can conceive of nothing more eloquent...there is an eloquence appropriate to writers who enjoy the highest authority and a full measure of divine inspiration. (4.25-26)

The utmost eloquence of Scripture is a requirement from its divine nature. He goes on in Book 4 to scorn those who ridicule the eloquence of Scripture.

Would those who despise our prophets as unlearned and unacquainted with eloquence (as if they themselves were learned and eloquent!) have wished to speak any differently if they had had something similar to say to such an audience – those of them, at any rate, who do not want to behave like freaks?  
(4.50)

This scorn would extend to those Manichaeans who dismissed the inspiration of the Old Testament. For Augustine the divine nature of Scripture naturally entails that it is useful for acquiring wisdom. This both rejects the wisdom of the world, as well as elevating Scripture to an essential place in the Christian’s development.<sup>28</sup> We have

<sup>28</sup> For example, “The wisdom of what a person says is in direct proportion to his progress in learning the holy scriptures” (4.19).

also noted how Scripture is vital for the Christian's faith, which "will falter if the authority of holy scripture is shaken" (1.89).

Augustine invokes the human and divine nature of Scripture to demonstrate the different layers of Scripture and therefore help resolve obscure texts as well as to help the reader see the importance of Scripture in the Christian's life.

When unpacking how the reader should handle Scripture, he does this in three ways. First is how Augustine practically uses Scripture in his argumentation. Secondly is the general principle for interpretation that he lays out. And finally are the general rules of interpretation, which he explains to his readers. We will deal with each of these in order.

## **2. Augustine's practical use of Scripture in *On Christian Teaching***

There are a few different ways Augustine uses Scripture in *On Christian Teaching*, occasionally in a formative way to provide *explanation* of a rule or line of thought, or more commonly to provide *examples* of how rules should be used and how Christians should be taught.

One of the occasions when Augustine uses Scripture to help build an argument is when discussing the pagan philosophies and arts. He allegorically interprets the story of the Israelites plundering the Egyptians upon leaving slavery (Exod. 12), as referring to how a Christian plunders that which is true and good.

These treasures – like the silver and gold, which they did not create but dug, as it were, from the mines of providence, which is everywhere – which were first

used wickedly and harmfully in the service of demons must be removed by Christians, as they separate themselves in spirit from the wretched company of pagans, and applied to their true function, that of preaching the gospel. (2.145)

This text is given as an explanation of why Pagan sources should be used by the Christian. Of course, Augustine held onto the Neo-Platonism of his time in Carthage and Rome. It is Platonism that he mentioned specifically with regard to the Christian's use of Pagan sources.

Any statements by which those who are called philosophers, especially the Platonists, which happen to be true and consistent with our faith should not cause alarm, but be claimed for our own use. (2.144)

There was obvious suspicion about Platonism and its Pagan roots, but Augustine is clear that just as the Israelites plundered the Egyptians of gold and silver, so the Christian should plunder the Pagan of what is true. There are also examples in Book 4 of Augustine using the Biblical passage to highlight the need for the Christian to teach. He quotes mainly from the Pastoral Epistles on the importance of passing on Christian truths (4.90-95). In this instance he uses Scripture in a formative way to explain why the Christian should teach.

There are several times time when Augustine could be accused of proof-texting; where he quotes scripture with little regard for its context to support his particular point. For example he uses Psalm 16:2 (God does “not stand in the need of my goodness”) to demonstrate that “God does not enjoy us, but uses us” (1.75), which appears to stretch the meaning of the text, and there are many similar examples. However, if Augustine appears to be quoting Scripture without concern for the meaning of the text, it is not deliberate. In the *Preface of On Christian Teaching* he is

critical of those who use particular texts to deny that they need human guidance. He gives the example of those who might use Acts 2:1-4 to defend that the Spirit speaks and we do not need human teachers (1.10). This is an example of “pride” where the reader is not willing to listen to other human teachers, but imposes his views upon the text.

The other way that Augustine practically uses Scripture is as an example of how his rules of interpretation should be applied or how the Christian should be taught. One of the rules of interpretation is that a text should always be seen as figurative as well as literal, and in this regard one word can literally mean one thing but figuratively mean something very different (3.73). Augustine provides the example of ‘leaven’ in the Bible. He quotes Matthew 16:6, 11 (“Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees”) and Luke 13:21 (“The kingdom of heaven is like a woman who hid leaven in three measures of wheat until it was all leavened”). In this example the literal meaning is the same: the leaven is the agent that causes bread to expand to a light and softer texture. However the figurative meaning is the opposite: on the one hand, the Pharisees are like leaven because they puff up and expand the truth with falsities, and on the other hand, the kingdom of heaven is like leaven because it will grow after time. This text epitomises how Augustine uses Scripture in *On Christian Teaching*, such as how to interpret signs using John 12:3-7 (2.7); the importance of knowing the basics of the biblical languages for words like *amen*, *alleluia*, *raca* or *hosanna* (2.34); the comparison of translations as an aid to the interpreter in Isaiah 58.7 (2.37); a knowledge of biblical numbers for the large catch of fish in Matthew 17:1-8 and Mark 9.2-6 (2.64-65); and basic logic which is helpful in 1 Corinthians 15:13-14 (2.119). These are just a few examples of how Scripture is used in this way.

In Book 4 Augustine uses Scripture as an example of how the teacher should present biblical truths in a way that is eloquent.

The speaker who is endeavouring to give conviction to something that is good should despise none of these three aims – of instructing, delighting, and moving his hearers – and should make it his prayerful aim to be listened to with understanding, with pleasure, and with obedience. (4.96)

His high view of Scripture means that he sees the highest form of eloquence being in Scripture itself. Book 4 is full of lengthy quotes from Scripture. He demonstrates how the grand, ornate and restrained styles are used. This is to direct the reader in how he should use eloquence when teaching. For example he quotes Romans 12:6-16, which includes the list of gifts,

We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness (v. 6-8; NRSV)

In addition to this, the passage also includes a flowing exposition of love,

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. (v. 9-12; NRSV)

This passage demonstrates the mixed style of speaking, which incorporates several different techniques. He comments,

The most attractive parts are those in which there is a graceful flow of phrases each duly balanced by the other phrases. (4.111)

Examples of the other passages include the restrained style of 1 Corinthians 6:1-9 (4.100-02) and Galatians 4:21-26 (4.107) the grand and ornate style of 2 Corinthians 6:2-11 (4.119-20), Romans 8:28-39 (4.121) and Galatians 4:10-20 (4.122-24).

Augustine then proceeds to quote from non-biblical sources to illustrate various styles. He quotes both Cyprian and Ambrose to demonstrate the restrained, mixed, ornate and grand styles in Christian writing (4.125-33). These examples are provided so that Augustine can show his readers how Christian teachers were taking biblical truths and using biblical eloquence to teach in various styles.

As we can see Augustine uses Scripture in two separate practical ways: to explain a rule and to give examples of rules in use. However, underlying his practical use of Scripture is a broader conviction about its nature and the overall governing principle that guides it.

### **3. The Governing Principle in *On Christian Teaching***

The governing principle in *On Christian Teaching* revolves around the *summum bonum*, or highest good. The *summum bonum* is the principle that all things must be aligned to. We will see that Augustine defines the *summum bonum* as the pursuit (or love) of God, as seen in Scripture.

*a. Pursuit (or love) of God as the summum bonum*

i. The idea of the *summum bonum*

The *summum bonum* (or ‘highest good’) is demonstrated through an *a priori* argument in Book 1 of *On Christian Teaching*. Despite never using the precise phrase *summum bonum*, this teleology is clear. Augustine logically argues that God is the greatest being. His argument runs as follows: that which is living ought to be considered higher than that which is not living (1.17); within life itself, humanity is to be considered the greatest of the creatures as it has both the ability to feel and intelligence; finally the thing greater than intelligent humanity is the intellect, or wisdom, that humanity is dependent upon. Therefore wisdom is the “unchanging form of life” (1.18); that is the *summum bonum*. And it is this wisdom that “deigned to adapt itself to our great weakness” (1.23) in the word made flesh.

Directly after this argument, Augustine proceeds to give two different analogies of the *summum bonum* as the pursuit of God in life. First, the *summum bonum* is compared to a homeland where earthly life is the journey towards this place (1.22-26). The point is that we ought not to become caught up with the love of life (the journey), when our real love should be God (the homeland). The second analogy is that of medical healing, where God is both the doctor and the medicine to heal humanity’s spiritual ill health (1.27-30). Again the point is that we must seek after God as medical care and the only way to full health. So in one way the *summum bonum* is the ultimate goal of all life and in another way is the only cure for humanity’s (fatal) ailment.

ii. The *summum bonum* as an *a priori*

Having demonstrated the place of the *summum bonum*, Augustine proceeds to the implication: the orientation of all things towards the *summum bonum*. For Augustine, if the *summum bonum* is the ‘highest being.’ In Augustine’s platonic logic, if something is the ‘highest being’ all things must align themselves to it, this is the *a priori* argument. Augustine quotes and gives an exposition of the divine rule of Matthew 22:37-40 (1.57-58) “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbour as yourself” (NIV). He uses this text to demonstrate and support what he has already shown through an *a priori* argument.<sup>29</sup>

This has laid the ground for Augustine to reintroduce the *frui/uti* distinction made earlier (first in 1.7, reintroduced in 1.39):

Among all these things, then, it is only the eternal and unchangeable things which I mentioned that are to be enjoyed (*frui*); other things are to be used (*uti*) so that we may attain the full enjoyment of these things.

Augustine wants the reader to understand that if God is the greatest being, then we must enjoy him (*frui*) either directly or by using (*uti*) other things to lead to our enjoyment of him. His definition of *frui* is: “to hold fast to it in love for its own sake” (1.8). As Oliver O’Donovan has pointed out, Augustine will move to refer to love (*amor/caritas*) and enjoyment synonymously.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> In other words, Augustine arrives at the divine rule without Scripture. A sympathiser with Augustine will say that he appreciates Scripture is philosophically sound and therefore Scripture and philosophy are two sides of the same coin; the coin being the love of God. But whether this is actually how Augustine views Scripture is a matter of debate.

Thus Augustine has presented an *a priori* argument for God as the *summum bonum* and the ultimate task is the love (*caritas*) or enjoyment (*frui*) of God.

The implication here is that everything must orientate itself towards God. First, humanity should orientate itself towards God. This means that all other loves must be sidelined on account of God. As he comments on the divine rule:

...so that you may devote all your thoughts and all your life and all your understanding to the one from whom you actually receive the things that you devote to him....it leaves no part of our life free from obligation, no part free as it were to back out and enjoy some other thing; any other object of love that enters the mind should be swept towards the same goal as that to which the whole flood of our love is directed. (1.42-43)

Augustine is explicit about our orientation to the *summum bonum*. Moreover, love of neighbour must now be defined and incorporated within the love of the *summum bonum* (1.43). Not only this, but love of self cannot be detached from the love of God (1.58).

For our study, it is of interest to note that interpretation of Scripture must also orientate itself to *summum bonum* (1.86-88). Thus, Scripture serves the purpose of rousing the reader to love God more (cf. 1.93). Augustine does not believe that we

<sup>30</sup> O. O'Donovan "Usus and Fruitio in Augustine *De Doctrina Christiana* I", *JTS* 33

(1982), 385. In the above quotation love (*amor*) is given in the definition of *frui*,

however later in 3.37 *caritas* is defined by *frui*. I am inclined to agree with

O'Donovan in suggesting that Augustine's initial definition of *frui* (1.8) is inadequate

for how he will go on to use the term, and because of this he will soon drop the use of *frui* altogether.

should love God because the Bible tell us, but we should love God because he is the highest being and Scripture instructs us how this should be done. Scripture is not the reason to love God, but is a vital piece in the Christian's equipment in his pursuit of the *summum bonum*. In other words, hermeneutics is not a goal in itself, but a means to the *summum bonum*.

Also of interest, but less explicit in *On Christian Teaching*, is the orientation of the believing community to the love of God. This is a logical conclusion of the *summum bonum*. This is hinted at in 1.32-35. The believing community is being prepared to be the perfect bride of Christ (that is to love him as they should) and as the body that serves Christ on earth (cf. Matt. 16.19). Christ "trains it and purges it...[that] he may take his wife for eternity" (1.33). That is, trained and purged for the perfect love of the *summum bonum*. Augustine is well aware of the communal dimension, which is key to a Christian's pursuit of God.

All in all, we can speak of the 'love of God' as the greatest task for humanity. Before we leave this subject we must offer caution in how we use the phrase 'love of God'. The love of God can be understood objectively or subjectively. It may mean 'our love for God,' or 'God's love (for us)'. For the most part the accusative is used, suggesting the translation 'our love for God',<sup>31</sup> although this is not a matter that can be resolved through grammar, because our love for God is dependent upon his love for us. However, we do not want to entangle ourselves in grammatical knots. The other, and more pressing question is Augustine's definition of 'love'. The Augustinian

<sup>31</sup> This point is less clear-cut than it seems. See Tarcisius J. van Bavel's discussion of 'The daring inversion: Love is God' ('The Double Face of Love in Augustine,' *AS* 17 (1982), 172).

definition is a far cry from the romanticism of the centuries to come. Words we have been using, such as ‘pursuit’ or ‘orientation,’ begin to coincide with Augustine’s meaning. Elsewhere he calls love “the will to become one with the object it loves.”<sup>32</sup> ‘Love,’ for Augustine is the desire or motivation towards relating to another, where we seek to become one with that person. We love God in order to become incorporated into his identity and he incorporated into ours. We are to be purged of all evil that distances us from God and must pursue the godly attributes that help us identify with him. This is Augustine’s definition of love.

#### *b. The Function of Scripture*

We have already touched upon the nature of Scripture in the discussion of all things being orientated to God. However, let us now focus on how the *summum bonum* relates to Scripture.

The purpose of Scripture is to aid fallen humanity. Indeed, if humanity had never fallen in the Garden of Eden, Scripture would be redundant. He affirms that “a person strengthened by faith, hope, and love, and who steadfastly holds on to them, has no need of the scriptures except to instruct others” (1.93). In other words, if a Christian achieves a certain level of faith, hope and love, Scripture has served its purpose, except to instruct others.<sup>33</sup> This statement comes in the context of “the three things that all knowledge and prophecy serve: faith, hope, and love” (1. 90). Although Augustine is not discussing the purpose of Scriptures the point still stands. Scripture exists to make the reader hold steadfastly to these three virtues, because humanity,

<sup>32</sup> *Ord.* 2.18.48 quoted in Tarsicius J. van Bavel, “Love” in *Augustine through the Ages*, 509.

<sup>33</sup> ‘Except to instruct others’ is a significant qualification and will be dealt with below.

through the fall, has loved other things and therefore has become lacking in faith, hope and love. We can say that Scripture is for fallen humanity a corrective where faith, hope and love are lacking.<sup>34</sup> In its most simple form, the function of Scripture for Augustine is to assist in the pursuit, or love, of God. Scripture must be ‘used’ (*uti*) by humanity to love God. How this works out can be split into four headings.

i. Scripture is to reveal Divine Wisdom or Love of God

The function of Scripture can be first seen in the revelation of divine wisdom. There are two passages in *On Christian Teaching* where this is evident: one is explicit, the other implicit.

Augustine is explicit when he presents the seven steps towards wisdom (2.16-25). He begins with the fear of God as the beginning of wisdom (2.23; Ps 110:10). This leads to holiness, knowledge, fortitude, compassion, purification and finally wisdom.

Scripture fits within the third of these stages: knowledge (1.24). Augustine then seems to digress into which scriptures are canonical. But the point is made; Scripture functions ultimately to reveal this wisdom so that the reader may have knowledge of it.

The more implicit reference is in the discussion of the person of Christ, as wisdom made flesh. This follows Augustine’s *a priori* argument that wisdom is the *summum bonum*. He continues to show how wisdom has ‘deigned to adapt itself to our great weakness’ (1.23) through the Word made flesh. Augustine develops this statement in

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<sup>34</sup> It is not clear if Augustine believes that any human can reach this position on earth where Scripture could not instruct them anymore.

different ways. One way is the Word having been made flesh in order to be communicated to us.<sup>35</sup> Thus Augustine says,

When we speak, the word which we hold in our minds becomes a sound in order that what we have in our minds may pass through the ears of flesh into the listener's mind: this is called speech. Our thought, however, is not converted into the same sound, but remains intact in its own home, suffering no diminution from its change as it takes on the form of a word in order to make its way into the ears. In the same way the word of God suffered no change although it became flesh in order to live in us. (1.26)

In other words, the Word became flesh that we might have knowledge of what this Word is. By inference, we can also say that through Scripture the Word becomes flesh in order to communicate itself to us.

## ii. Scripture is to instil Divine Wisdom or Love of God

Related to the previous point, is that the function of Scripture is to instil this Divine Wisdom or love of God.

The most important section in this context is 1.84-88. In this section Augustine gives the criterion for the interpretation of Scripture: the love of God. To measure a sound interpretation we must see how the interpretation promotes the love, or enjoyment, of God. This love or enjoyment is what the Law and the Prophets direct the reader towards.

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<sup>35</sup> Augustine goes on to develop this phrase as the necessary medicine for fallen humanity (1.30)

...the fulfilment and end of the law and all the divine scriptures is to love the thing which must be enjoyed and the thing which together with us can enjoy that thing. (1.84)

Therefore, when we are faced with an interpretation of Scripture we must measure it up to how it leads to the love and enjoyment of God. Issues of authorial intent, historical investigation, theological meanings are all subservient to how an interpretation leads to the love of God. Augustine has strong words for those who claim to have understood Scripture and yet their interpretation does not accomplish this goal:

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. (1.86)

He develops this point further to demonstrate that the primary parameter of interpretation is the love of God, and a reader should be focused on this task.

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 passage has not made a fatal error, and is certainly not a liar...If...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. (1.86-88)

Augustine believes that Scripture gives direction in the love of the *summum bonum*, and if our interpretation leads us to anything but this, we have gone astray.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>36</sup> This is emulated in 3.33-34: “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.”

This point is further developed immediately afterwards in 1.89. Here, Augustine condemns those who knowingly encourage interpretations that are contrary to the original meaning. If the original meaning is not sought, an interpreter will undermine the authority of Scripture to lead the reader to love God. Although Augustine allows for some to be lead off the path of sound interpretation and still arrive at the love of God, this is not the preferred route, and should not be promoted. The result of this is a clear picture of the authority that Scripture possesses. So he warns, “faith will falter if the authority of holy scripture is shaken; and if faith falters, love itself decays.” So if we do not allow Scripture to speak its truth, our love will rot. Put positively: The faithful reading of scriptures allows love to grow. Of course, enabling love to grow is Augustine’s great goal in all his writing.

The function of Scripture is also seen through how it creates wisdom in the reader.

The wisdom of what a person says is in direct proportion to his progress in learning the holy scriptures – and I am not speaking of intensive reading or memorization, but real understanding and careful investigation of their meaning. (4.19)

In other words, if a person wants to speak wisely his development is proportionate to how well he knows the scriptures. Part of the function of Scripture for the teacher is to give him knowledge so that he is more than an eloquent rhetorician, but one who can distil the love of God in his listeners. As we will see, this is related to the teacher’s love of neighbour.

iii. Scripture is a tool in the love of neighbour

Scripture also functions as a tool in fulfilling the love of one's neighbour. This is the subject of Book 4. Augustine begins both Books 1 and 4 with reference to the things on which the interpretation of scripture depends: 'discovery' (*inventiundo*) and 'presentation' (*proferendi*). Here, presenting or communicating Scripture is a necessary part of the love of neighbour. Towards the end of Book 1, we see that even if a person has faith, hope and love he still needs Scripture so that he can teach others: "Therefore a person strengthened by faith, hope, and love, and who steadfastly holds on to them, has no need of the scriptures except to teach others" (1.93). No matter if you manage to grasp on to faith, hope and love to the extent that Scripture cannot teach you any more, it is still required to instruct others. For Augustine this matter of instructing others cannot be ignored.

#### iv. Scripture is to interest both simple and intellectual

Finally, Scripture serves the function to interest both the simple and intellectual. At this point we see the clearest picture of Augustine the scholar. Scripture has infinite depth. There is no ground to say that the message of Scripture is too plain for some.

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. (2.15)

This is said in light of Augustine's questioning of why one story of conversion (told banally) is not as pleasant as the same event told in the language of the Song of Solomon. The reason for this is to satisfy those with hungry minds, like himself. The language of Scripture moves and explains the love of God to the reader; to the simple

it will be the plain texts that move the reader, to the intelligent it will be the obscure texts. So the profound message of Scripture is put in ways for both the simple and the intelligent. The intellectual message of Scripture appealed to Augustine as a response to the anti-intellectual position of many of the churches in North Africa.<sup>37</sup> Scripture was able to speak to minds of all levels.

Indeed, obscure passages often are given to excite and sharpen the reader. But they are sometimes given as,

...a helpful and healthy obscurity in order to exercise and somehow refine their readers' minds or to overcome the reluctance and whet the enthusiasm of those seeking to learn. (4.61)

Augustine sees the plain parts of Scripture as necessary for giving the simple meaning (2.31) and obscure parts to feed the mind. In particular, this would have responded to the intellectual arrogance associated with his Manichaean past. The depth of Scripture and the stimulus that it provides means that no one is too intelligent to benefit from it.

### *c. The Role of the Community*

The community of believers is important to the Christian who wishes to love God and his neighbour. To aid our understanding of what is meant by community we will look to other parts of Augustine's works to understand how his doctrine of the Christian community is formed. The most helpful concept is given in *The City of God*. *The City of God* was written towards the end of Augustine's life between 413-26 at a similar time when *On Christian Teaching* was completed. It will be helpful for us to

<sup>37</sup> For the anti-intellectual position of the churches in North Africa see Teske, "Introduction" in *On Genesis* and Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 42-43.

understand the ‘believing community’ as the city of God given in *The City of God*.

That is “a number of people bound together by some tie of fellowship” (*Civ. XV.8*).<sup>38</sup>

#### i. Community and the Love of Neighbour

The divine rule is to ‘love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and love your neighbour as yourself’ (Matt. 22:37-40).

Augustine argues that the second command to love your neighbour is a sub-clause of loving God (1.58). Since to love God with heart soul and mind, means that no part is left to love neighbour, therefore, the love of neighbour must be a part of the love of God. This leads him to what is an Augustinian motto for Christian community:

Every sinner, *qua* sinner, should not be loved; every human being, *qua* human being, should be loved on God’s account; and God should be loved for himself. (1.59)

Here, the love of God incorporates the command to love one’s neighbour. Not only is this the scriptural commandment, but it is also the logical place of the neighbour within the *a priori* argument for the *summum bonum*. Augustine’s argument for the *summum bonum* requires that every other pursuit is incorporated within the pursuit of the *summum bonum*. The *summum bonum* is not so much the highest or greatest of a number of beings that require our love, but is actually the only being that requires our love. Therefore any other love (such as love of neighbour) cannot exist distinct from the love of God.

Augustine spells out the important biblical and philosophical basis for the love of neighbour, then proceeds to show how this is the foundation for community. He

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<sup>38</sup> Translation for *De Civitate Dei* is taken from Henry Bettenson, *Augustine: City of God*.

begins with the implication that all people should be loved equally (1.61). He then moves on to how this would take form in the Christian community:

Of all those who are capable of enjoying God together with us, we love some whom we are helping, and some who are helping us; some whose help we need and some whose needs we are meeting; some to whom we give no benefit and some by whom we do not expect any benefit to be given to us.

But it should be our desire that they all love God together with us, and all the help that we give to or receive from them must be related to this end. (1.63)

This is how Augustine sees the love of neighbour affecting the community. So whatever role anyone in this community plays, they should be loved on account of God. And the chief end of all this loving is that the whole community will love God together. James O'Donnell is correct in asserting, "this view of love is profoundly communitarian."<sup>39</sup> O'Donnell shows that in this society everyone is concerned with the well-being of others. So much so, that they no longer attempt to "impose one person's views on others",<sup>40</sup> but through concern for others desire that all love God together.

This view of love is emulated in *The City of God*, most clearly in Book XIX. When discussing the order that should govern human society Augustine says:

Now God, our master, teaches two chief precepts, love of God and love of neighbour; and in them man finds three objects for his love: God, himself, and his neighbour; and a man who loves God is not wrong in loving himself. It follows, therefore, that he will be concerned also that his neighbour should love God, since he is told to love his neighbour as himself. (*Civ.* XIX, 14)

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<sup>39</sup> James O'Donnell, *Augustine*, 19.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 20

In a similar way to *On Christian Teaching*, the love of neighbour requires that a person encourage his fellow man to love God, thus creating a community where the love of God is paramount (cf. *Civ.* XIX.19, 23).

ii. The practice of love of neighbour in *On Christian Teaching*

Tarcisuis van Bavel understands the love of neighbour as being the love of God put into practice. “Although love of God comes first in the order of commanding (*ordo praecipendi*), love of neighbor comes first in the order of performing (*ordo faciendi*).”<sup>41</sup> Van Bavel argues that this is because we cannot always see God, but we can always see other human beings, therefore, we are required to love our neighbour. A scriptural example is Matthew 25:31-46, where “whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me” (NIV).<sup>42</sup>

iii. The place of the community in *On Christian Teaching*

The community has a central role in *On Christian Teaching*. In the preface of *On Christian Teaching* Augustine opposes those who believe that they can learn without others (*Preface*, 7-11). Humanity learns the simplest things from one another (such as the alphabet) and therefore should submit to each other especially with greater things. Not only is learning from others important for the progress of the human race, but more critically it is the only way love can exist within a community:

...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. (*Preface*, 13)

<sup>41</sup> Van Bavel, “Love” in *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopaedia*, 512.

<sup>42</sup> Augustine interprets this passage in relation to the love of God in *Serm.* 38.8; 42.2; 86.5; 239.5, as John Burnaby notes in *Amor Dei*, 133.

This love, that ties people together, will be suffocated without the progressive teaching within the community. Augustine also cites numerous biblical examples of those who have learned in love from others: such as when Ananias was sent to Paul at the apostle's conversion (Acts 9:3-8), Philip being sent to the eunuch who was reading the book of Isaiah (Acts 8:26-35), or Moses being assisted by Jethro in Exodus 18 (*Preface*, 12-15).

The attitude of teaching is reflected throughout *On Christian Teaching*. However, in the closing sections of Book 2, Augustine cautions the reader about the future. For example, the young student is advised not to “venture without due care into any branches of learning which are pursued outside the church of Christ” (2.139).

Augustine stresses that the church of Christ is to be a haven for the student, so he can safely move between different branches of learning. The church of Christ is protected by a close fellowship of love so that the student is protected from those who do not have true wisdom. In addition to this, Augustine shows how the young Christian can overcome difficulties by relying on the work of others. He refers to Eusebius who undertook a study in chronology because of some of the problems in the biblical literature (2.141). This provides the aid for the reader of Scripture who does not have the time or resources to investigate these difficulties.

The idea of letting other people's wisdom help the reader of Scripture is very important. It even extends to allowing pagan sources assist the Christian as well. Pagan sources were a sensitive issue in the Church because the acceptance of these ideas had often led to compromised morals. To combat any reservations about learning from pagan sources, Augustine uses the analogy of the Israelites taking gold

and silver from the Egyptians before they leave the land of slavery (2.144; Ex. 12:35-36). The gold and silver represent the truths that pagan society possess (such as logic and astrology), but do not own. It is the task of Christians to take these truths and use them for the good of the community. For this reason Peter Brown calls Augustine the “great ‘secularizer’ of the pagan past”.<sup>43</sup> This secularising of hermeneutics has stayed with the Church ever since. It is important that Christians use these truths for the whole of the community and not just for their own faith; for example the Manichaeans set a bad example by revelling in the exclusivity of their insights. All borrowing from pagan society must be done in the context of love. Augustine emphasises this point so much that he instructs the Christian to “ponder incessantly” Paul’s phrase, “knowledge puffs up, but love builds up” (2.148; 1 Cor. 8.1).

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, we will develop one particular point regarding how the community relates to the interpretation of Scripture. In *On Christian Teaching* the community has a role when interpreting Scripture that leaves the reader of Augustine with important questions. For example, does Augustine believe that Scripture can ever truly be interpreted without the believing community? If the measure of sound interpretation is love, how essential is a community of love to this process? A significant question is whether *authority* is an appropriate word for how Augustine envisages Scripture in the Christian’s life.

At several stages Augustine points to the authority of the institutionalised Church with regard to controversial issues; for example when deciding which books are inspired and which are not. In 2.24-25, Augustine claims that when deciding what scriptures

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<sup>43</sup> Brown, “Augustine”, 266.

are canonical, we should “follow the authority of as many catholic churches as possible” (2.24). However, it is not the authority of the Church that Augustine points to, but the consensus of churches that is important. Augustine acknowledges the difficulty that several churches may say several competing things (2.25). He advises that the Christian should begin with what is most widely accepted.

Another, more tricky passage is 1.34-35, where Augustine quotes Matthew 16:19 and shows that the church has “keys” to heaven “that if anyone does not believe that his sins are forgiven in God’s church they are not forgiven” (1.35). If we understand Augustine as supporting the church’s authority to open or close the gates of heaven, we misunderstand him. Augustine’s argument is in fact to show that unless a person has been accepted into the community of believers, the city of God, and has been embraced into “the bosom of the same church” he will not be accepted in heaven (1.35).

It is clear that Augustine does not see the institutionalised Church as having significant authority. In place of this there is an important role for the community. This is because the true love of God or neighbour cannot exist outside the community of believers. An essential part of loving God is being part of community. This is obviously founded on Augustine’s Trinitarian theology (1.10-12). God as the *summum bonum* exists as part of a triune community, and therefore, humanity in its truest form exists in community (Gen 2:18). This is even shown in Augustine’s purpose for writing *On Christian Teaching*: that “rules for interpreting the scriptures...can usefully be passed on” (*Preface* 1). He is hoping to demonstrate his

love of his neighbour by passing on these rules of interpretation, that the truths of Scripture may be available to the reader.

We have also seen that the goal of Scripture is to assist the Christian in his love of God. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that true scriptural interpretation must be done within the context of the community of believers. If interpretation is done outside the community, it is difficult to imagine how the love of God and one's neighbour can be the goal.

For Scripture to be properly interpreted, it must take place in the community.

Augustine does not tackle head-on the issue of whether the community owns or dictates the interpretation of the scriptures, but it is an inevitable question if the Scriptures are to be reserved for just one community. I believe that it follows from *On Christian Teaching* that the scriptures have been specially crafted for the church to be used in her pursuit of the *summum bonum*, and to this degree the community owns the scriptures (and their interpretation). Therefore, if someone does not orientate their life around the pursuit of the *summum bonum* the scriptures are useless.

Alternatively, if we attempt to read Scripture outwith the community of believers, it will be similarly useless.

Our discussion has shown *On Christian Teaching* has a governing principle that centres on the *summum bonum*. This demonstrates Augustine's view of God, Scripture and the community of believers. We have also looked at how we should view the relationship between Scripture and the community. This relationship is one of mutual belonging: the Scriptures require the community of believers for their

proper interpretation, and the community requires Scripture for maturing in the love of God.

Augustine's view of Scripture leaves two responsibilities for his readers. First the community of believers has a responsibility in interpreting the scriptures. It must not content itself with anything less than letting Scripture explicitly drive us to the love of God (1.86). Thus, any debate that does not build up the love of God should be abandoned. This is the believing community's responsibility. Secondly, true interpretation of Scripture must be done within the community of believers (*Civ.* XV.8). Those who do not know this love of God through neighbour cannot find the true meaning of scripture. Their interpretation may be helpful for the believer to use, but not essential and never complete.

## Chapter 2: *On The Spirit and the Letter*

In late 412, Augustine wrote the most profound exposition of a biblical book in all his anti-Pelagian writings.<sup>44</sup> *On the Spirit and the Letter (De Spiritu et Littera)* is a close examination of the Epistle to the Romans and uses 2 Corinthians 3:6, “the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life,”<sup>45</sup> as an interpretive guide. Augustine’s initial attack on Pelagian thought began with this treatise as well as *On the Merits and Forgiveness of Sins, and on the Baptism of Infants* (412) and *On Nature and Grace* (415).<sup>46</sup> Because *On the Spirit and the Letter* is written near the beginning of the Pelagian controversy, we have the benefit of Augustine’s clear articulation of the Christian faith without the polemical exacerbations that soon developed in the debate. It is at this point, before the controversy becomes heated, that we see Augustine’s wonderfully sharp mind open up Scripture. As John Burnaby notes,

He is going straight to the fountainhead of all Christian faith in the grace of God, and triumphantly vindicating that faith with an understanding of Paul more profound than any shown by earlier interpreters.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> See Bonner quoting William Bright, “This treatise, ‘which, perhaps, next to the *Confessions*, tells us most of the thoughts of that “rich, profound, and affectionate mind”, on the soul’s relation to God”, *Augustine of Hippo*, 323.

<sup>45</sup> All biblical quotations are taken from how they are quoted in Augustine’s treatise unless otherwise stated, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (vol. 5) translated by Peter Holmes (unless otherwise stated).

<sup>46</sup> Evans suggests that the process of writing *On Nature and Grace* couple with reading Pelagius’ *On Nature* made Augustine aware of the dangers of Pelagian thought (*Pelagius*, 82-86, 89).

<sup>47</sup> Burnaby, *Augustine*, 188. See also Evans, *Pelagius*, 74.

The setting of the treatise was a question raised by his friend, Marcellinus, who had read his previous work *On the Merits and Forgiveness of Sins*. He queried Augustine's assertion that it is possible for a person to be sinless without there existing an example of a sinless person (scriptural or otherwise).<sup>48</sup> Augustine recognised that at the heart of Marcellinus' question is a seriously flawed presupposition – that sinlessness is possible by human endeavour, rather than by the grace of God.

Marcellinus would agree that anything is possible with God, without the need for an example (e.g. God may allow a camel to pass through the eye of a needle without there ever being an example of this<sup>49</sup>). Yet his question suggested that man's sinlessness must have an example because it is not in the same category as an act of God, but is in fact an act of man. To the contrary, Augustine suggested man's sinlessness would be an act of God, and therefore, should be placed in the same category as, for example, a camel passing through the eye of a needle (2-5). The rest of the treatise is an unfolding of how God's grace changes the human heart, not human endeavour.

*On the Spirit and the Letter* is significant for our discussion of hermeneutics because Augustine's theory of interpretation is woven throughout the argument of the treatise. James O'Donnell comments that it is the "...*Spirit and Letter*, whose title reveals the

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<sup>48</sup> *On the Merits*, II, 6-8.

<sup>49</sup> *On the Spirit and the Letter*, 1. All quotations of *On the Spirit and the Letter* are from Sparrow Simpson. *Translations of Christian Literature*.

intimate relation between his thought on [grace] and his theory of exegesis”.<sup>50</sup> We will examine this theory of interpretation through Augustine’s use of Scripture as well as cautiously proposing a theological hermeneutic from *On the Spirit and the Letter*.

## 1. General Background

It will be important to establish some background issues before proceeding to the discussion of Augustine’s treatise.

### a. ‘The Spirit and the letter’ (2 Corinthians 3:6) in Patristic Exegesis

The Church Fathers gave great weight to the phrase ‘the Spirit and the letter’ (as occurs in Rom 2:29, 7:6; and 2 Cor. 3:6). The Fathers generally subscribe to one of two interpretations. Bernardin Schneider helpfully categorises these interpretations as the ‘formalistic’ and ‘realistic’ interpretation.<sup>51</sup>

The ‘formalistic’ interpretation applies ‘the Spirit and the letter’ as an allegorical hermeneutic. In the formalistic interpretation the ‘spiritual’ or allegorical sense of Scripture is to be preferred to the literal sense. The architect of this interpretation (hereafter, the allegorical interpretation) was Origen of Alexandria, and would become the standard reading in the Alexandrian School.<sup>52</sup> Arguably, Origen and his followers would be fiercer defenders of their understanding of 2 Corinthians 3:6 because so much depended upon it; indeed, their very starting point for interpreting

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<sup>50</sup> James O’Donnell, *Augustine*, 69.

<sup>51</sup> Schneider, “The Letter and the Spirit”, 164.

<sup>52</sup> See Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 6, 70. Previously, Philo had used this method as a means to read his philosophical ideas into Scripture (see Smalley, *The Bible*, 3-4).

Scripture rested on this verse.<sup>53</sup> The alternative ‘realistic’ interpretation does not understand this verse to be about interpreting Scripture, but about the Law and freedom from the Law. ‘The letter’ is the Mosaic Law, and ‘the Spirit,’ broadly speaking, is the New Covenant (although there are variations). G. Ebeling has coined this the ‘economy-of-salvation’ interpretation of 2 Corinthians 3:6.<sup>54</sup> It is associated with the Antiochene School and has followers such as Tertullian and John Chrysostom. Unlike the allegorical interpretation, in the realistic interpretation, these texts (Rom 2:29, 7:6; 2 Cor. 3:6) form only a small part of a much wider argument.<sup>55</sup>

There is no clear consensus on what is meant by ‘the spirit and the letter’ throughout the Church Fathers.<sup>56</sup> But for our purposes it is useful to place Augustine within this interpretive landscape. We can see Augustine’s interpretation of this verse in the different times he refers to the ‘spirit and the letter’, particularly when he quotes 2 Corinthians 3:6 rather than the two other instances in Romans.<sup>57</sup> Apart from its use in *On the Spirit and the Letter* he quotes 2 Corinthians 3:6 in the *Confessions* and *On Christian Teaching*. In the *Confessions*, he describes how the allegorical

<sup>53</sup> See Hafemann, “2 Cor. 3:6 became *the* biblical proof-text used to support the hermeneutical program of distinguishing between a literal or external and a spiritual or internal sense of Scripture and the allegorical method which it was carried out”, *Paul, Moses*, 3 (author’s emphasis).

<sup>54</sup> This term is translated from the German by Scott J. Hafemann, *Paul, Moses*, 2.

<sup>55</sup> For example see Chrysostom, *In II ad Cor. Ep. Comment., Hom. 6.2*. Chrysostom uses 2 Cor. 3.6 as a polemic against the Manichaeans, not as a basis for his own thought.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

<sup>57</sup> For a list of Augustine’s use of 2 Cor. 3.6 see *ibid.* 178, n. 59.

interpretation was used and commended to him at the time of his conversion by Ambrose (VI. v, 6). Through Ambrose the allegorical approach unlocked the Law and the Prophets, which his Manichaean background had despised:

I was also pleased that when the old writings of the Law and the Prophets came before me, they were no longer read with an eye to which they had previously looked absurd, when I used to attack your saints as if they thought what in fact they did not think at all. *Conf.* VI. v. 6<sup>58</sup>

He describes his excitement when Ambrose took an Old Testament text, which he had bypassed as a Manichaean, and provided a spiritual interpretation.

“[I was] delighted to hear Ambrose...[take those] texts which, taken literally, seemed to contain perverse teaching he would expound spiritually, removing the mystical veil.” *Conf.* VI. v. 6

Nevertheless his excitement at the allegorical interpretation did not convince him of its validity when he later admits, “whether what he [Ambrose] said was true I still did not know.”<sup>59</sup> So in the *Confessions* Augustine seems sympathetic, yet not a passionate defender of the familiar allegorical interpretation. In *On Christian Teaching*, Augustine’s handbook of hermeneutics, he advocates the allegorical interpretation for unclear metaphorical words and phrases (1.20-21). This is a watered down version of Origen’s or Ambrose’s exegesis, but Augustine will only permit the allegorical interpretation for difficult texts, not every text. Moreover, this is the only reference to ‘the letter and the spirit’ in the whole of *On Christian Teaching*, which reflects its low priority in Augustine’s interpretive toolbox.

<sup>58</sup> The other reference to 2 Cor. 3:16 in the *Confession* is in V. xiv, 25. In this passage Augustine favours the formalistic interpretation as an apologetic against the attacks of the Manichaeans on the Old Testament.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

*On the Spirit and the Letter* is the only work of Augustine's where he deals at length with "the spirit and the letter" in 2 Corinthians 3:6. He acknowledges that the allegorical interpretation exists. Indeed he says it is the 'natural' reading of 2 Corinthians 3:6 (*On the Spirit and the Letter*, 6). Yet quickly adds, "this is not the only meaning of the apostle's saying". From this point on he does not refer to the allegorical interpretation again in *On the Spirit and the Letter*, but only to the realistic, or economy-of-salvation, interpretation. As we will see, Augustine identifies this as the ideal platform to expound his doctrines of grace and humanity against the Pelagians.

#### *b. The Pelagian Debate*

The Pelagian debate is key to understanding Augustine's argument in *On the Spirit and the Letter*. Augustine and Pelagius never actually met and Augustine appeared to take issue not so much with Pelagius, but with his followers. Indeed, he did not harbour a strong desire to interact with Pelagius, until hearing some of Pelagius' followers (such as Julian and Caelestius). Paul Lehman, like many others, is sympathetic towards what Pelagius attempted to achieve. He was a man angered by moral failure in the Church and this frustration is seen in his theology that emphasised free will. However when Caelestius, "a bolder and rasher man," and Julian, a "scheming and ambitious man," adopted Pelagian theology, Augustine was forced to oppose such views.<sup>60</sup>

Both the Pelagians and Augustine agreed that nature and grace were important.

However it is the role of humanity and how grace interacts with humanity that was the

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<sup>60</sup> Paul Lehman, "The Anti-Pelagian Writings", 212.

point of disagreement.<sup>61</sup> Central to the Pelagian view was free will. Pelagius argues that man is capable of choosing the right and the wrong and to become godlier and morally better through human endeavour or choice.<sup>62</sup> This freedom of the will is essential to human nature and is responsible for both human evil and good. Therefore it is in creation, not in our salvation or sanctification that we see God's grace. God, in his graciousness, creates humans with free will and it is then over to humanity to choose the good and reject the evil. This is the nature of humanity and the nature of grace according to the Pelagian view.

Augustine had two problems. (i) Should not all goodness be ascribed to God? (ii) What place does God's grace demonstrated at the cross have? Augustine, through *On the Spirit and the Letter* and some of his later writings, would suggest that these are two critical flaws in the Pelagian view. In answer to the first question, Augustine said that all goodness should be ascribed to God, whether humanity thinks he has chosen it or not, but no evil should be ascribed to God. For humanity, this means that free will involves taking responsibility for any evil that they choose and God taking the glory for any good that they choose. Humanity is only capable of choosing any good by the strength of God. This strength of God is primarily seen in grace shown in the redeeming work of Christ (at the cross) and in the sanctifying work of the Spirit (after the cross). Hence the second question is answered. There are echoes here of *On*

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<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

<sup>62</sup> Again, Lehman is sympathetic towards Pelagius as a man who become frustrated at the immorality of the Church and its lackadaisical attitude towards righteousness. Thus he attempted to find inspiration in free will as a form of moral betterment (*ibid.*, 204).

*Christian Teaching* where God is the *summum bonum* and all things serve his glory. Because he is the *summum bonum* all goodness must be attributed to him.

The first confrontation between Augustine and the Pelagians came over sin and baptism. In 411, sin had been at the centre of the condemnation of Caelestius, one of Pelagius' followers. Caelestius denied that Adam's sin hurt anyone but Adam himself, so that the rest of humanity is completely free. This led to the denial of original sin and the accusation – which he denied – that he no longer believed in infant baptism. This is when Augustine launched his first anti-Pelagian treatise, *On the Merits and Forgiveness of Sin, and on the Baptism of Infants* (early 412). Here he strikes at the heart of the practical implication of Pelagian thought. If humanity sins by choice, not by nature, as the Pelagian argument went, there is no need for infants to be baptised because they will not have chosen the evil yet. Augustine attempted to show them how they were outside the bounds of orthodoxy. In *On the Merits and Forgiveness* Augustine showed the natural consequences of Pelagian thought on creation, grace and sin. In *On the Spirit and the Letter* and *On Nature and Grace* Augustine moved to attack the central theological pillars of Pelagianism.

## **2. Augustine's Argument in *On the Spirit and the Letter***

It is important for us to understand the argument at the centre of *On the Spirit and on the Letter*. Not only will we see how he interacts with Scripture to arrive at his conclusion, but it will also allow us to see that his argument leads to certain hermeneutical principles. There are two major themes in this treatise: Grace and Humanity. Under these are several sub-themes: sin, the Law, the Gentiles, the Holy Spirit and the New Covenant. These sub-themes are introduced and unpacked

throughout the treatise as Augustine launches his attack. As we weave our way through Augustine's argument we will see how he crafts these themes and sub-themes together to highlight the weakness of the Pelagian position. His overarching aim would be to challenge the minimizing of God and his grace. For Augustine, God's goodness is supreme, even at the expense of our free will. As we proceed through Augustine's argument we will pay particular attention to the scripture texts that he uses as marking stones in his argument.

The treatise begins with Augustine replying to his friend Marcellinus. Having offered a brief response, he homes in on Marcellinus' false presumption. That is, if a Christian were made perfect it would be by the Christian's human effort, not by the grace of God. Perfection or any kind of sanctification is only achieved by the grace of God. Augustine asks whether a Christian can "walk by faith" (2 Cor. 5:7) without the divine assistance of the Spirit, "by whom there is formed in [the Christian's] mind a delight in, and a love of, that supreme and unchangeable good which is God" (5). This is true grace: Spirit inspired love for God.

Subsequently, Augustine comes to the text that will be the focus of the treatise: "The letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life" (6).<sup>63</sup> Immediately this is linked with Romans 7:7, 11. These texts are used to demonstrate how the law kills a person's soul, not his exegesis; as in the allegorical interpretation of 2 Corinthians 3:6. The message in the Epistle to the Romans is the ultimate validation for this interpretation and becomes the interpretative context for what is meant by "the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life" (8). Put another way, 2 Corinthians 3:6 is Augustine's summary of the teaching of Romans. More importantly for Augustine, grace is seen as a present means of life.

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<sup>63</sup> Cf. *Retr. II*, 37.

Augustine's argument turns to the nature of humanity.<sup>64</sup> During the whole discussion he continually bounces between Gospel dichotomies: law and grace, life and death, the Spirit and the letter. These dichotomies are often found in Scripture and particularly Paul, and Augustine uses them to show two competing ideals of the good that brings life against the evil that brings death. Grace, life and the Spirit are all connected, whilst the law, death and the letter are also connected. The dichotomies serve to show how the Pelagian view of grace in creation and human free will is in fact the law, the letter and death, whereas Augustine's greater definition of grace in salvation and sanctification as well as creation shows how grace will lead to the Spirit and to life. Indeed, this line of thinking is a continuation of Paul's argument in the Epistle to the Romans.

Augustine begins his portrayal of humanity with sin and the law (9). His text is Romans 5:20-21 ("law came in, with the result that the trespass multiplied", NRSV) and 6:1-2 (What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it?, NRSV). At this point he is content to link sin with the law through Romans 5 and 6; however, later, he will link sin to the fall of Adam through Romans 1:18-23 (19). Augustine follows the line of thought in Romans 6 to show "that the same medicine was mystically set forth in the passion and resurrection of Christ" (10) and proceeds with a lengthy quote of Romans 6:3-11. The purpose of this is to show Christ as the restorer of a right way of living, as opposed to the Pelagian view of human endeavour. In Chapter 11, Augustine sets out how Christ's grace, or mercy, relates to sanctification: <sup>64</sup>Sparrow Simpson aptly entitles chapters 1-9 'The Bearing of this Doctrine of Grace on human self-sufficiency', *St. Augustine*, 16.

He does not, indeed, extend His mercy to them because they know Him, but that they may know Him; nor is it because they are upright in heart, but that they may become so, that He extends to them His righteousness, whereby he justifies the ungodly.

Augustine has a broad understanding of the phrases ‘know Him’ and ‘upright in heart,’ which do not simply refer to soteriology, but also to subsequent “works of righteousness” (11). This underlines God’s continuing activity after salvation through to sanctification. Indeed, this view of grace is the example is illustrated in Paul who considered himself the “least of the apostles” (1 Cor. 15:9), and thus able to commend grace (12). Once again, the anti-Pelagian sentiment is clear in Augustine’s acknowledgement of his sin and looking to God’s grace for righteousness.

Augustine, in the same way as St. Paul, asks what salvation by grace means for how the law should be understood (13-20). His purpose is to show that the law is not meant to justify a person (as the Pelagians would have it), but to point to Christ who is the only one who can justify (13). The law without Christ has no justifying effect. The primary basis for this is the righteousness that is from God in Romans 3.20-24. Augustine proceeds to say that the Pelagian view is as ineffective for justification as the law is, because both are looking to self-righteousness, not Christ (14).<sup>65</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Initially, Augustine levels two observations at how the Jewish Law is like the letter that kills (13). First, if a Jew kept the whole law, this would be to his glory and therefore a transgressor of the law. The second observation is that the law “wrought wrath” (Rom. 4:15), and so the keeper is motivated by a fear of punishment rather than a love of righteousness. This too is a transgression of the law. These two criticisms are levelled at the Pelagian view of Justification (14). Quotes from Romans 8:20 and 7:7 show that these Old Covenant views must be dropped in the new era of

With the purpose of the law being to demonstrate sin, there can be no boasting in the law (16-17). Augustine corrects the Pelagian view of the law, and so also corrects their view of piety. Piety should not be considered keeping the law, but the wisdom to give thanks to God for who he is and what he has done (18-19).

Augustine continues the spirit/letter distinction by highlighting the difference between the law of works and the law of faith (21-40). More acutely, Augustine probes the question regarding what the essence of Christian obedience is. The Pelagian position uses the written law to show what their free will should choose. Thus, obedience depends upon the strength of the will. With regard to the law, if the role of the law of works is to show man's sin, does that make the law redundant in an era of grace?

Augustine, with Paul, says 'no'. The law becomes the law of faith, which directs the Christian to an adequate response to God's grace.<sup>66</sup> Augustine gives the example of the command 'do not covet' (21). The law of works is good and shows his covetousness, however the law of faith tells him that the command 'do not covet' is an apt response to God's grace. This understanding of the law unravels the Pelagian argument by showing that obedience according to the Pelagians stems from the law of works. Augustine's careful exegesis of the book of Romans proves this position to be as biblically untenable.

grace. Here justification in the Jewish Law is directly compared with the Pelagians.

Augustine accuses the Pelagians of being the same as those under the Jewish Law – both living outside the grace of Christ. So both the Jewish Law and the Pelagians are living by the letter and thus leading to death.

<sup>66</sup> "What the law of works commands by its threatening the law of faith secures by believing" (22), Sparrow Simpson translation.

He moves on to answer the potential problem of the Ten Commandments and the Pauline answer in Romans (23-25). This leads him to the role of the Spirit who inspires love of the law of faith, which is written on the Christian heart (26-32). Jeremiah 31 is an important text for this argument (33-40, see below).

Augustine quotes Jeremiah 31:31-34 which begins, “Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will consummate a new covenant with the house of Israel...” The passage proceeds to tell how the Israelites had neglected the covenant God made with them on account of their sin. As we can see, Augustine insists humanity take responsibility for evil in the world. The law is there to prove humanity’s sin, so when it is unfulfilled it is not the law’s fault but the sinful heart of the person.

Now it was not through any fault of its own that the law was not fulfilled, but by the fault of the carnal mind; and this fault was to be demonstrated by the law, and healed by grace. (34)

Immediately following is a quote from Romans 8:3-4. What the law was unable to do has now been achieved through God sending his Son. The passage from Romans, as with Jeremiah, naturally leads to new life in the spirit, “that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit” (Rom. 8:4). Augustine is to draw another link between Paul and the prophet, which further shows the unifying biblical theme. He quotes 2 Corinthians 3:3, “Not in tables of stone, but in the fleshly tables of the heart” and claims,

I apprehend...no other reason for mentioning “the New Testament”...than because he [Paul] had an eye to the words of the prophet [in Jeremiah 31:33].  
(35)

Augustine sees it as important to draw witnesses from both Old and New Testament to his defence. The Christian is now able to obey the command solely because God, by his Spirit, has written the commands on the Christian's heart. There is no place for the Christian to claim any credit, as would be tempting in the Pelagian understanding of grace.

The penultimate section begins with a problem raised by Romans 2:14-15 regarding how the Gentiles can come to have "the law written in their hearts" (43-49).<sup>67</sup> This is clearly a problem because Paul often refers to the Gentiles as those who are not believers and therefore it is unclear why the Spirit would write laws on the hearts of those who do not believe. He presents two possible solutions. The first solution is that this is an instance when Paul is referring to those Gentiles who already believe in Christ. He proves this possibility through a series of quotations from the first four chapters of Romans where the Gentiles refer to those who now believe (44-47). The second solution is that the image of God in every human means the law is by nature written on human hearts (48-49). Augustine is indifferent to either,

But whichever of these views is accepted, it is evident that the grace of God was promised to the new testament even by the prophet, and that grace was definitively announced to take this shape, – God's laws were to be written in men's hearts (49)

In all this Augustine stresses that grace, in the New Testament, is seen through the cross of Christ and the work of the Spirit, not solely in creation (50-51). We will return to this passage later.

<sup>67</sup> In conversation with others, I often hear Augustine accused of proof-texting but by allowing the text to raise problems in this treatise Augustine proves the accusation untrue in this case.

If the law is now written on the heart, Augustine anticipates the accusation that he has done away with free will (52). Instead, he proposes he has strengthened free will. Life in the Spirit is the life of freedom; any other life is slavery to sin.<sup>68</sup>

The final significant section is regarding faith (53-60). This section deals with the question whether, if salvation and sanctification are down to God's grace, faith is within our power. For Augustine faith is indeed in our power. He distinguishes between desire and ability, and how faith can be developed within these opportunities. His discussion does not contribute much to hermeneutical discussion. Augustine quotes several psalms and some Gospel passages about faith being a positive action of ours. In particular he uses Psalm 103 as a meditation for praise due to God.

This takes us to the set of concluding remarks in chapters 61-66 where Augustine provides a summary of the work and some of what he hoped to have achieved. He aligns his views on grace and the law directly with Paul, in opposition to those Pelagians who claimed Paul for their side (61). The closing chapters, in typical Augustinian manner, are a doxological finale on love as the true fulfilment of righteousness (61-66).

### **3. Augustine on Grace and Augustine on Scripture**

We now turn to the question of how Augustine specifically uses Scripture in *On the Spirit and the Letter*. It is because Augustine uses a plethora of biblical texts throughout the treatise that his use of Scripture is complex. To add to the complexity, Augustine will intertwine several biblical texts from different sections of Scripture

<sup>68</sup> He quotes 2 Corinthians 3:17, "where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty".

within the one argument.<sup>69</sup> We will look at his handling of three specific texts: The Epistle to the Romans, 2 Corinthians 3:6 and Jeremiah 31:31-34. Each one will provide a different nuance of Augustine's exegesis.

*a. The Epistle to the Romans*

As we have noted above, the primary text for Augustine in *On the Spirit and the Letter* is not the text of the title, but the Epistle to the Romans. Augustine uses a detailed examination of Romans to deconstruct the work of the Pelagians, not least Pelagius' own *Commentary on Romans*. The obvious presupposition is that Augustine holds Paul's writing in the highest regard. The whole ethos of *On the Spirit and the Letter* is that Augustine wishes to be faithful to the teaching of the apostle Paul (61). Of course it is Pelagius who claims Paul as his chief ally, so Augustine proceeds to the heart of the debate. At a most basic level, this demonstrates that Augustine is concerned to listen to Paul, not argue from a purely philosophical level or impose his own theology on the text.

Several different sections of the Epistle to the Romans are examined in different ways in *On the Spirit and the Letter*. However, for the major passages (such as Romans 2:14-15, 3:22-24 and 7:6-25), Augustine is uniform in how he handles the texts.

In his opening discussion of the insufficiency of humanity Augustine quotes Romans 5:21-22 and soon after 6:1-11 (9-10). Here the apostle anticipates the misuse of grace to live a licentious life, as Augustine notes that some "perverted people could perversely interpret" (9, Teske translation). Augustine absorbs himself in the

<sup>69</sup> Jake Andrews notes, "He weaves a complex web of scriptural passages in order to force his point home" in "Augustine and Pelagius", 32.

apostle's argument to understand the line of thought. By looking immediately to 6:1-11 he allows the context to interpret the meaning of the text. He even represents the language of Paul so that his reader may understand grace like medicine, curing the illness of sin. This thought of Paul he considers a "holy meditation" about unreserved trust in God to cure all human ills (11). Augustine briefly touches upon Romans 5 and the legacy that Adam leaves to the human race. This chapter would play a large part in the debate with Pelagius over the impact of Adam's sin on humanity. However, disagreement with Pelagius is only dealt with quickly in *On the Spirit and the Letter*. It is more fully explored in *The Soul and its Origin* (419).<sup>70</sup>

A few chapters later, Augustine comes to discuss Romans 3:22-24 (14-16). The purpose of this exegesis is to open the discussion of how Scripture defines what it means to "praise God as the Author of our righteousness" (14). For the Pelagians, this refers to choosing to satisfy the law. However, for Augustine, as he shows through Paul, no righteousness can be achieved through the law. Here, Augustine provides a specific example of a Pelagian interpretation of Romans where they praise God for providing the law that they can satisfy. Augustine responds by quoting one verse (3:20; "By the law there shall no flesh be justified in the sight of God."). He proceeds to confirm his point by examining the context of Paul's statement (2:22-24, 15-16). This leaves little misunderstanding that Augustine fully believes he is following Paul's intended meaning, even when quoting just one verse.

In passing, it is worth noting Augustine's lengthy quote of Romans 7:7-25 (25). He suggests that Paul's silence over circumcision and the Sabbath imply that such

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<sup>70</sup> As Burnaby notes, "The matter [original sin] was bound up with the exegesis of Romans 5", *Augustine*, 184.

practices will not have a place in the New Covenant. Interestingly, Augustine uses an argument from silence to make this point. So rather than being obsessed with the wordiness of Scripture, he seeks to identify the broader meaning of Paul. For Augustine, the truth of Scripture is in the meaning of the text, not the words.

The one remaining text, 2:14-15, is the largest of Augustine's expositions (43-51). Having explained the difference between the Old and the New Testaments, Augustine discovers a problem text: Romans 2:14-15 raises a question:

For some one may say, "If God distinguishes the new testament from the old by this circumstance, that in the old He wrote His law on tables, but in the new He wrote them on men's hearts, by what are the faithful of the new testament discriminated from the Gentiles, which have the work of the law written on their hearts, whereby they do by nature the things of the law, as if, forsooth, they were better than the ancient people, which received the law on tables, and before the new people, which has that conferred on it by the new testament which nature has already bestowed on them? (43)

Augustine anticipated critics raising such a text to attack his thesis. As we have seen above he offers two suggestions. The first is that these Gentiles are New Testament believers. The warrant for this response is the line of thought in the first two chapters of Romans, where he traces the argument concerning Jew and Gentile. This demonstrates that Paul views both in the same category, only that there is a priority for the Jews in offering the Gospel. Hence, "it follows that such Gentiles as have the law written on their hearts belong to the gospel, since to them, on their believing, it is the power of God unto salvation" (44). The preceding verse ("The doers of the law shall be justified," 2:13) can then be understood in the wider context to mean that

justification precedes doing the law. For doers of the law are the justified, “so that justification does not subsequently accrue to them as doers of the law, but justification precedes them as doers of the law” (45). So, the first solution that Augustine offers is provided by an examination of the context and argument of Romans. To further this point he examines the wider context of the law and the prophets (46). As Jake Andrews has pointed out, Augustine here uses one of his exegetical rules of allowing clearer texts to illuminate less clear texts (*On Christian Teaching*, 2.31).<sup>71</sup> He quotes from Genesis 15:6 and the righteousness that is granted to Abraham because he has believed (46). This is the clearer text that he uses to demonstrate that righteousness does not come from doing the Law, but by believing. This is an obvious verse to use to illuminate Paul’s argument, because Paul himself quotes from Genesis 15 in Romans 4. He also alludes to Jeremiah’s statement that the law is written on the hearts of believers. This points to Augustine’s view of the theological unity of Scripture as well as its ability to self-interpret.

The second response appeals to the image of God, which remains in unbelievers, “since, God’s image has not been so completely erased in the soul of man by the stain of earthly affections” (48). To explain this point Augustine leaves Romans to briefly examine the image of God in man. In his discussion he refers to both the Psalms and the Gospel of Luke. This demonstrates not only his willingness to examine the context of the book, but also the context of the wider canon.

Although we have raised the major texts in Romans that Augustine cites, it would be unfair to base our appreciation of his exegesis of Romans on these parts of *On the Spirit and the Letter* – for it is Augustine’s exegesis of Romans that is the heartbeat of

<sup>71</sup> Andrews, “Augustine and Pelagius”, 35.

this treatise. Nor would it be fair to suggest that Romans is simply used as a weapon against the Pelagians. Pamela Bright puts it well in saying, “the great theological works of his maturity tend to reinforce the argument that for Augustine, the Epistle to the Romans was a constant companion of his intellectual and spiritual journey.”<sup>72</sup>

To summarise, Augustine’s use of Romans suggests four hermeneutical principles: (i) a pursuit of the meaning of the author and of the text; (ii) a pursuit of the meaning that transcends the mere wording of the text; (iii) sympathy to the context of the biblical book as well as the wider biblical corpus; (iv) and allowing clearer texts of Scripture to illuminate unclear texts. These are the interpretive rules from his looking at Romans.

*b. 2 Corinthians 3:6*

2 Corinthians 3:6, “The letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life,” is the verse alluded to in the title of this treatise. Augustine understands this phrase to interpret the whole Epistle to the Romans (8). At this point he appears to liken the verse to a hermeneutical motto for understanding Romans.<sup>73</sup> For the most part this is maintained throughout the treatise. The uniformity of thought in the Pauline literature, as well as with the rest of Scripture, provides enough warrant for this. Not only is Augustine

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<sup>72</sup> Pamela Bright, ‘Augustine,’ in Jeffrey P. Greenman and Timothy Larsen (eds.) *Reading Romans through the Centuries*, 71.

<sup>73</sup> In addition to his application of this verse to Romans (8), he also deals with it more specifically in chapter 6. He loads his theology regarding the law into this phrase, without use of the context of 2 Corinthians 3:6. This is a further indication of his ‘motto-like’ use of this phrase.

bullish about the theological unity of Scripture, but he also allows one Scripture text to interpret another.

In chapter 24 he deals with 2 Corinthians 3:6 in dialogue with the Ten Commandments. This consists of quoting 2 Corinthians 3:3-9 as a demonstration of the commandments being written on stone tablets in the old covenant and on believer's hearts in the new. He refrains from commenting on the wider context, instead acknowledges its presence and the theological implications.

A good deal might be said about these words [2 Cor. 3:3-9]; but perhaps we shall have a more fitting opportunity at some future time. At present, however, I beg you to observe how he speaks of the letter that killeth, and contrasts therewith the spirit that giveth life. (24)

This is significant. When Augustine quotes the context he uses it to validate his interpretation – this will be defended in chapter 30. This would suggest that when he has previously quoted this verse (particularly in chapter 6) the context is presupposed. Therefore, we can say that when Augustine quotes a biblical verse, in this instance, he presupposes knowledge of the context. In regards to 2 Corinthians 3:6 being a hermeneutical motto, the context of this verse is presupposed in the interpretation of this motto.

In summary, it is clear that Augustine is willing to allow Scripture to interpret Scripture. This is seen in 2 Corinthians 3:6 interpreting the Ten Commandments (24), Jeremiah (30) and Romans (8). Secondly in quoting 2 Corinthians 3:6 as a hermeneutical motto for Romans (8), he presupposes an understanding of the wider

context of the verse. The motto is still used in a specific way, but the context is not ignored.

*c. Jeremiah 31:31-34*

The final passage to examine is Jeremiah 31:31-34. The importance of this passage lies in the fact that it is prophesying the work of the Spirit in a person's heart.

Augustine's argument is also greatly strengthened by having a passage in the Old Testament foretelling that 'the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life.'<sup>74</sup>

In Augustine's interpretation of the phrase "for they had not kept to my testament" (Jer. 31:32), we notice how much 2 Corinthians 3:6 has affected his reading:

He reckons it as their own fault that they did not continue in God's covenant, lest the law, which they received at that time, should seem to be deserving of blame. For it was the very law that Christ "came not to destroy, but to fulfil." Nevertheless, it is not by that law that the ungodly are made righteous, but by grace; and this change is effected by the life-giving Spirit, without whom the letter kills. (34)

The law condemned sinful man, and yet the law does not make the man righteous, but the Spirit. In this interpretation he uses 2 Corinthians 3:6 as a sort of base text to interpret others. Presumably, this is another case, as above, where Augustine uses his exegetical rule of a clearer text illuminating another text (*On Christian Teaching*, 2.31).

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<sup>74</sup> Augustine does suggest there are plenty more passages of a similar ilk, however he fails to mention which they are. "It is not doubt often referred to and foretold as about to be give, but not so plainly as to have its very name mentioned" (33).

As an aside, it is obvious here that there is potential circularity where one text is used to interpret others. The problem arises because Augustine does not defend which text should interpret which other text. He uses interpretive licence to decide that it is 2 Corinthians 3:6 that should interpret the other passages and not vice versa. One possible defence is that 2 Corinthians 3:6 is the plainer text because of its concise, retrospective manner. It also comes further in the storyline of salvation history. However this potential circularity does not worry Augustine. If we look again at chapter 34 of *On the Spirit and the Letter* we could note that Galatians 3:21-22 is also used as an interpretive text for Jeremiah 31:31. We can again deduce that Augustine believes in the theological unity of Scripture. Augustine's presupposition is that the theology of Corinthians and Galatians is broadly the same as the theology of Jeremiah. If he did not have this presupposition there would be no justification for this kind of interpretation.

#### **4. An Augustinian Hermeneutic of *Spirit and Letter*?**

Before concluding this chapter, allow me to suggest cautiously a theological hermeneutic from the argument in *On the Spirit and the Letter*. Although not explicit in *On the Spirit and the Letter*, it can be deduced from the theology of the treatise and can be seen in Augustine's interpretation.<sup>75</sup>

Augustine has outlined his understanding of the Spirit and Letter in accordance with the 'economy-of-salvation' interpretation. We must then ask how this impacts his

<sup>75</sup> We may call this interpretation Augustinian. Although he is using Paul, and could be argued as 'Pauline,' his interpretation of Paul in this instance differs significantly enough from his contemporaries that it can properly be called Augustinian. It is perhaps not explicit as Augustine's concern is with the Pelagians and little further.

hermeneutic. I would like to suggest there is a theological hermeneutic here that is defined by having grace through Christ as a presupposition. This is, before opening the text, if the reader has the Spirit, and the law written upon his heart, this will significantly change his interpretation than if he reads Scripture only without the Spirit. The Pelagians read Romans with the Law written on tablets of stone and therefore their interpretation lead to death. However Augustine reads Romans in grace and the Spirit and therefore his reading leads to life. This, I believe, is the broad hermeneutical principle that can be seen in *On the Spirit and the Letter*.

This can be further explained in two ways which are closely related. Firstly, Augustine wishes to read Scripture by the Spirit. Not the ‘spiritual sense’ as in the allegorical interpretation, but allowing Scripture to show the reader how he should live in the Spirit (as opposed to the letter). In reading the New Testament by the Spirit, Augustine then turns to read the Old Testament by the Spirit also. On account of the new covenant in the Spirit, the Old Testament promise is fulfilled in Christ.

A surprising ally can be found in the Lutheran scholar Ernst Käsemann.<sup>76</sup> Without referring to Augustine, Käsemann presents “the provocative thesis...[that] for the first time in Christian history, [Paul] developed an approach to a theological hermeneutic.”<sup>77</sup> Käsemann notes that the “meaning of the antithesis [the spirit and the letter], and even more its consequences for the apostle’s theology, almost always remain undiscussed or shadowy.”<sup>78</sup> Presumably he fails to insert the clause ‘in modern scholarship’, for this is exactly the point Augustine discusses.

<sup>76</sup> “The Spirit and the Letter,” in, *Perspectives on Paul*, 138-166.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.* 138.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.* 140.

Käsemann shares Augustine's interpretation of 2 Corinthians 3:6, Romans 2:29 and 7:6 as Paul's 'economy-of-salvation'. He helpfully explains, "the antithesis between spirit and letter is primarily related to anthropology."<sup>79</sup> This is very similar to Augustine's position. Augustine similarly finds the antithesis centred on the human condition. God, in his grace, writes his commands on the hearts of his people (29) and this means that the Christian has a different hermeneutic when he reads the command, 'do not covet'. Augustine gives us a glimpse of this hermeneutic:

But if the Holy Spirit does not provide help, substituting good desire for evil desire, that is, pouring out love in our hearts, though the law is good, it increases the evil desire by his prohibition. (6, Teske translation)

There are numerous other examples; one more may be helpful:

Accordingly, by the law of works, God says to us, Do what I command thee; but by the law of faith we say to God, Give me what Thou commandest. Now this is the reason why the law gives its command, - to admonish us what faith ought to do, that is, that he to whom the command is given, if he is as yet unable to perform it, may know what to ask for. (22)

It is in this way that the command has two alternative readings. We can then say that Augustine has a theological hermeneutic which allows the command to direct him in the appropriate response to God's love. In this hermeneutic, grace demonstrated by Christ on the cross is the pretext, and what must happen in the reader's heart before opening Scripture.

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<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.* 146.

Lest we should think this hermeneutic is applicable only to commands, we can also see its effect on Augustine's reading of the Old Testament.<sup>80</sup> The most obvious example is Jeremiah 31:31-34. Although this refers to a command written on hearts, it is not a command in itself. The theological hermeneutic again begins with grace as seen in Christ as the necessary starting point for the reader. And Augustine proceeds to read this passage in the light of the grace on the cross. This allows him to understand the new covenant, not as a promise, but as a reality.<sup>81</sup>

Another example of this is Augustine's discussion of the 'finger of God' in Exodus 31:18 (28). In comparing the 'finger of God', which inscribes on both stone and hearts, he highlights how this phrase was a foreshadowing of the writing of the finger at Pentecost:

For as fifty days are reckoned from the celebration of the Passover (which was ordered by Moses to be offered by slaying the typical lamb, to signify, indeed, the future death of the Lord) to the day when Moses received the law written

<sup>80</sup> This is the point which Käsemann focuses his theological hermeneutic. He refers to the understanding of the Old Testament "in the light of the lifting of that veil through Christ, which is to say, practically speaking, from the angle of the message of justification" (*ibid.*, 155). His hermeneutic has the slightly different nuance of centring on justification.

<sup>81</sup> To highlight Augustine's point, we might suppose that the Pelagians would have read the Old Testament, not beginning a theology of grace, but beginning with a theology of works. This results in Jeremiah 31:31-34 becoming a promise to the Pelagians. Interesting, this theological hermeneutic unlocks the Old Testament to the reader. Yet, this is not in an allegorical way (as with the Alexandrian School), but in a Christological way.

on the tables of stone by the finger of God, so, in like manner, from the death and resurrection of Him who was led as a lamb to the slaughter, there were fifty complete days up to the time when the finger of God – that is, the Holy Spirit – gathered together in one perfect company those who believed. (28)

Augustine views the Israelites receiving the Decalogue in the context of the grace of Christ demonstrated on the cross. It is more than possible that Augustine implicitly uses this theological hermeneutic when understanding the Ten Commandments. So it can be seen that Augustine uses this theological hermeneutic is evident, not in reading the New Testament, but the Old Testament also.

However, this theological hermeneutic also has the problem of being circular and potentially unfalsifiable. It is circular in as much as one theology or interpretation is used to interpret the rest of Scripture and therefore Scripture cannot speak outside of this original theology to correct or refine it. It would also produce unfalsifiable interpretations of Scripture. If Augustine interprets one passage in a certain way starting with grace and the commands written on his heart, it impossible to argue against an interpretation because he may respond that there is no agreement because others do not have the law written on their hearts. This would be reflected in an interpretation that looked for the general Christian truths in a text rather than listening to the specific details of the text. Gresham Machen expresses the point that some have used 2 Corinthians 3:6 to gloss over biblical data.

...they are held to indicate that Paul was no “literalist,” but a “Liberal,” who believed that the Old Testament was not true in detail and the Old Testament law was not valid in detail, but that all God requires is that we should extract the few great principles that the Bible teaches and not insist upon the rest.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Machen, *What is Faith?*, 188.

This said, these two issues are problems, but do not affect the validity of Augustine's hermeneutics. If an interpretation is circular or unfalsifiable, it is not necessarily false, but cannot be proven true either. The issue is one of proof rather than practice. With these two criticisms in mind, the theological hermeneutic appears to be a helpful way to understand how Augustine read Scripture. His starting point is grace and this can be traced through his interpretation.

### **Conclusion**

Although *On the Spirit and the Letter* is primarily a treatise against the growing heresy of Pelagianism, we see some general principles from Augustine's use of Scripture. These can be broadly summarised as follows.

Firstly, Augustine has an appreciation for the whole of Scripture. He allows scripture to interpret scripture. Yet, he does not disregard the unity of a particular collection of books (for example the Pauline corpus).

Second, it is clear that Augustine lets the immediately surrounding verses act as the primary interpretative tool. This might be to raise a problem or resolve a difficulty (both shown in Rom. 2:14-15). At other times the context is simply used to understand the passage. In this, Augustine pursues the meaning of both text and author, which for Augustine are interchangeable.

Finally we examined a possible theological hermeneutic that arises from *On the Spirit and the letter*. Augustine appears to use grace demonstrated at the cross as a starting point for reading Scripture. This is particularly seen in his reading of the

commandments and of the Old Testament. Grace is used as a presupposition for reading Scripture. It opens the Scriptures to the Christian and gives life in the Spirit.

### Chapter 3: *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*

Augustine's aim in *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* (*De Genesis ad Litteram*; 401-415) is as follows:

To say the right thing is to say what is true and appropriate, not arbitrarily rejecting anything or thoughtlessly affirming anything so long as it is doubtful where the truth lies in light of the faith and Christian doctrine, but unhesitatingly asserting what can be taught on the basis of the obvious facts of the case or the certain authority of Scripture.<sup>83</sup> (7.1.1)

Through careful analysis Augustine seeks the “true and appropriate” understanding of Genesis 1-3. This is the clear and obvious meaning of Scripture; often called the plain sense. He wants to present the truth of Scripture in a way that is well reasoned, not “arbitrarily rejecting anything or thoughtlessly affirming anything”. For in presenting a comprehensive exegesis he hopes to show cynical readers, primarily the Manichaeans, that contrary to their opinion, the Old Testament is of great profit to the Christian reader.<sup>84</sup> His fear is that these cynics will arbitrarily reject his interpretation, and therefore his task of proving the validity of the Old Testament will be lost. And only with well-argued exegesis will he be able to prove the validity of the Old

<sup>83</sup> All quotations are taken from John Hammond Taylor, trans. and annot. *St Augustine: The Literal Meaning of Genesis*. Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation. New York: Newman Press, 1982.

<sup>84</sup> *Conf.* V. xiv. 24. In the *Confessions* Augustine reports that because he was reading the Old Testament “literally” (Chadwick trans.) that the text was lifeless, and it was only through Ambrose's allegorical reading, that he found the Old Testament to have life. It is therefore ironic that Augustine now sees that it is the literal sense that will free the Manichaeans to understand the truth of Genesis.

Testament. Yet it is not sought in a detached sense but “in light of the faith and Christian doctrine;” that is, within the parameters of the Christian faith. Governing his whole interpretation are “obvious facts” and the “authority of Scripture”.

This text is particularly interesting because his aim is a well-reasoned interpretation that is bound by Christian doctrine. He demonstrates this interpretation by pursuing what he calls the ‘literal meaning’ of the text.<sup>85</sup> In the course of this chapter I hope to unpack what Augustine understands as the ‘literal meaning’. In this we will decipher the hermeneutical principles Augustine devises in interpreting the literal sense of Scripture. The text was finished around 415, a period when Augustine is writing both anti-Donatist and anti-Pelagian treaties. At the age of sixty, this is a mature writing where he admits, “there are more questions raised than answers found.”<sup>86</sup> The text balances *On Christian Teaching* by providing a practical example of Augustine’s interpretation.

Augustine affirms that in Scripture there are many levels of the text to be considered, “eternal truths that are taught, facts that are narrated, the future events that are predicted, and the precepts or counsels that are given” (1.1.1).<sup>87</sup> In *The Literal*

<sup>85</sup> Cf. 1.17.34.

<sup>86</sup> *Retractions* 2.50 (CSEL 36.159).

<sup>87</sup> This point is echoed in the Westminster Confession of Faith XIV. II. “By this faith, a Christian believes to be true whatsoever is revealed in the Word, for the authority of God Himself speaking therein; and acts differently upon that which each particular passage thereof contains; yielding obedience to the commands, trembling at the threatenings, and embracing the promises of God for this life, and that which is to come.”

*Meaning of Genesis* he questions whether “narrative events,” although they are interpreted figuratively, “must be expounded and defended also as a faithful record of what happened” (1.1.1). His goal is to identify ‘what happened’. For the modern reader this sounds like a pursuit of the historical event; for Augustine it is so much more. When searching for ‘what happened’ or the obvious meaning of Sacred Scripture he will include the textual issues of authorial intent and narrative meaning, as we would expect. However, he also incorporates in the literal sense the theological meaning of the text, as well as the Christian and spiritual sense, a wider canonical meaning, and an ecclesial dimension.<sup>88</sup>

Augustine also recognises that Scripture has a special nature. It is God’s Sacred Book for his Holy people, the Church. All interpretation, and particularly the literal meaning, must conform to two rules. First, interpretation of Scripture must adhere to the taught biblical doctrines of the Church. Secondly, this interpretation must serve to build up the Church in love for God and neighbour. This second rule coincides with the governing principle set out in *On Christian Teaching*.

Augustine writes *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* in a particular Christian environment and this is important in understanding what he is trying to achieve. The historical context of his writing will act as a cautionary note against hastily drawing conclusions from the exegesis. As a student at Carthage, Augustine adopted the principles and practices of the Manichaeans.<sup>89</sup> Part of their teaching was to reject the Old Testament as Sacred Scripture. Having left this way of thinking many years

<sup>88</sup> This would provide the basis for the four senses of Scripture (literal, allegorical, moral and mystagogical) popular in the medieval period. See Bray, *Biblical Interpretation*, 147.

before, Augustine aims to show how the Old Testament, and particularly Genesis, is an accurate record of history and theology.<sup>90</sup>

This means that *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* is strongly apologetic in nature.<sup>91</sup>

Greene-McCreight explains that this means “Augustine himself curbs any desire to set up his own decisive solution”.<sup>92</sup> Augustine leaves gaps in his exegesis because his primary concern is to show that there are often several possible solutions that do not compromise the Rule of Faith. This is highlighted in the *Retractions*, where he summarises that his text leaves “more questions raised than answers found”.<sup>93</sup> On rare occasions Augustine’s apologetic objective actually inhibits his articulation of the literal meaning. For example when discussing at what point man and women were made he is concerned to affirm what options Scripture permits rather than articulating the literal meaning. He resolves finally to say:

Scripture does not permit us to understand that in this manner the man and woman were made on the sixth day, and yet does not allow us to assume that they were not made on the sixth day at all. (6.6.11)

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<sup>89</sup> He later explains that he “fell in with men proud of their slick talk, very earthly-minded and loquacious” (*Conf.* III. vi. 10).

<sup>90</sup> Other works such as *The City of God* and the *Confessions* suggest that Augustine saw the first three chapters of Genesis as especially important to defend in this regard. Many doctrines such as creation, baptism, the origin of the soul, original sin are based around his interpretation of these three chapters.

<sup>91</sup> K.E. Greene-McCreight describes the work as “apologetically-driven biblical interpretation” (*Ad Litteram*, 52).

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> Cf. p. 73.

He wishes to establish the bounds of possible interpretations, rather than seeking a firm literal interpretation.

It is interesting to note that Augustine's strategy in combating those who reject the Old Testament is to provide a literal interpretation. It is not the figurative, allegorical, or even 'spiritual' meaning that will open up the Old Testament to cynics, but a defence of the literal sense of the text. In Book 8, Augustine acknowledges that earlier in his career, when he sought to provide the Manichaeans with an interpretation of the Old Testament, he often skimmed the literal meaning,

I explained its figurative meaning as briefly and as clearly as I was able, so that the Manichees might not be discouraged by the length of the work or the obscurity of its contents and thus put the book aside. (8.2.5)<sup>94</sup>

Augustine recognises that an apologetic defence of Scripture must be based on a defence of its plain sense. Augustine's systematic exegesis of Genesis 1-3 reflects this apologetic concern to have a comprehensive and well argued interpretation.<sup>95</sup>

## **1. The Literal Sense**

### *a. Introductory Issues*

In any exegete's approach, discovering the literal sense should be his first task. The literal sense has methodological priority. Augustine explains, "we must first point out the facts as reported by Holy Scripture and then, if necessary, indicate whatever

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<sup>94</sup> He is referring to his former work *De Genesi contra Manichaeos*.

<sup>95</sup> This can be contrasted with *On the Spirit and the Letter* where there is no systematic exegesis.

figurative meaning they may have” (4.10.20). Greene-McCreight helpfully comments:

The literal meaning is not sought first because it is more “true” or more “fitting” than the figurative, but simply because it is the proper order of interpretation first to set out the literal meaning and then to indicate whatever figurative meaning may be gleaned from the foundation of the literal meaning.<sup>96</sup>

This appears to be the conclusion of a mature Augustine in his later life. He understands the importance of a firm hermeneutical method that begins with the plain sense of Scripture.

#### *i. Authority*

The issue of authority is central to Augustine’s interpretation of the literal sense. With the discrediting of the Old Testament by certain Christian factions the defence of the authority of Scripture, and especially the Old Testament, is paramount. The first point to note in understanding how Augustine defends the authority of the Old Testament is his insistence that all texts of Scripture have the same authority and reliability. This is based on the fact that both Old and New Testaments are the Word of God. Therefore if one part of Scripture can be discredited the whole authority of Scripture falls apart. This is significant because Augustine is presenting the Old Testament on the same authoritative level as the New Testament and thus if he fails to affirm the authority of the Old Testament, the whole of Scripture’s authority will be discredited.

But the credibility of Scripture is at stake, and as I have indicated more than once, there is danger that a man uninstructed in divine revelation, discovering

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<sup>96</sup> *Ad Litteram*, 55.

something in Scripture or hearing from it something that seems to be at variance with the knowledge he has acquired, may resolutely withhold his assent in other matters where Scripture presents useful admonitions, narratives, or declarations. (2.9.20)

Indeed, not only is the authority of Scripture a unity, but it also covers the Christian path. The above quote illustrates how keen Augustine is to maintain the importance of Scriptural authority in the Christian's life.

The question of authority can be a difficult issue to square with the literal or plain sense. Augustine regards the literal sense as the "obvious facts" (7.1.1), which are for a large part self-evident. However he believes the literal sense is self-evident, so long as the reader appreciates the nature and authority of Scripture. This causes tensions when the text appears to be saying something absurd. Augustine handles this tension by asking if the meaning fits with the nature and authority of Scripture. For example, when discussing the fall and expulsion of Adam and Eve from the garden in Book Eleven, Augustine offers a brief caveat against the literal meaning. He comments,

One may expect me to defend the literal meaning of the narrative as it is set forth by the author. But if in the words of God, or in the words of someone called to play the role of a prophet, something is said which cannot be understood literally without absurdity, there is no doubt that it must be taken as spoken figuratively in order to point to something else. (11.1.2)

Of course a meaning is 'absurd' for Augustine if the meaning varies from either reason or the Christian faith.<sup>97</sup> In a similar case, Augustine deals with the absurdity <sup>97</sup> An example of this is in 5.19.39, where Augustine discusses when Scripture appears to say that God knows something in time. He considers this absurd because it is inconsistent with the character of God and therefore must be interpreted figuratively

differently. He does not look to a figurative interpretation, but explains the absurdity through human ignorance. “It is easier to confess our ignorance in this matter than to go against the obvious meaning of the words of Holy Scripture” (4.12.38).

Augustine’s argument is that within the possible uncommon meanings, none compromise the nature or authority of Scripture and therefore a figurative interpretation is unnecessary. However, there appear to be no hard and fast rules as to when the exegete should content himself with a difficult literal interpretation and when he should reject this difficult literal interpretation for a figurative one. I believe this demonstrates the fluidity of Augustine’s literal sense. Depending on the text and the possible options, Augustine will apply different hermeneutical principles. At some points he sees the faith or the authority of Scripture being compromised, so will move straight to a figurative interpretation and at other times he accepts Scripture’s obvious meaning and explains any difficulties through human ignorance. His chief concern is that the authority of Scripture is not discredited and the Church built up. The consequence is flexible rules for interpretation.

It is clear then that the literal sense is obvious so long as it upholds Scripture as God’s Word to the Church. This results in a circular, self-authenticating view of Scripture.<sup>98</sup> The obvious question to ask is how a self-authenticating view of Scripture can properly be called the plain, obvious, or reasoned sense, particularly for someone who does not share Augustine’s view of Scripture or the Old Testament (for example the as God making “it known by angels or men.”

<sup>98</sup> In 5.9.24 Augustine offers liberty to exegetes so long as they keep within the truth of Scripture: “If our conclusions seem impossible to anyone, let him seek another by which he can show the truth of Scripture; for it is undoubtedly true even if it is not shown to be.”

Manichaeans). That is, is it obvious or plain that Scripture has self-authenticating authority? For Augustine the answer is simply, Yes. His reason is the role of the Holy Spirit illuminating the reader to the truth of Scripture.<sup>99</sup> Although this is an important point to be developed by later theologians, Augustine does not spend much time on the role of the Holy Spirit.<sup>100</sup>

The issue of authority is raised again when Augustine relates Scripture to theology and secular knowledge. In seeking the literal sense whilst upholding the authority of Scripture, Augustine attempts to allow Scripture to inform and be informed by secular topics such as astrology or mathematics. An interesting example is when Augustine puzzles over why God rested after six days. On the one hand Scripture affirms that God did rest, and yet God cannot be fatigued or in need of rest. At this point he allows his theology to inform his reading of the text by denying that God needed rest.<sup>101</sup>

I shall make my mind perfectly clear, laying down two points as certain: first, God did not find joy in a period of time devoted to rest as one might after toil as he comes to the long-sought end of his efforts; and, secondly, the words of Holy Scripture, which rightly possess supreme authority, are not ideal or false when they say that God rested on the seventh day.” (4.14.25)

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<sup>99</sup> Cf. 9.13.23.

<sup>100</sup> For example see John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion* Book 1, IX. 3.

<sup>101</sup> Some might say this is an unfair point as Augustine has a theology derived directly from Scripture and therefore his theology is right to guide his interpretation.

However, in 4.15.26 Augustine clearly argues that God has no need of other creatures, not on account of a biblical text, but because he is God and by definition has no needs.

In this case Augustine resolves to accept two opposing views rather than deny Scriptural authority or divine self-sufficiency. This demonstrates the tension between the obvious meaning and orthodox theology. It once again highlights the versatility and fluidity of Augustine's interpretation of the literal sense.

The authority of Scripture goes beyond just theology into the realms of the secular. Augustine points to how Scripture has the authority to pronounce on secular issues such as science. This is demonstrated in Augustine's explanation of the waters over the heavens (2.5.9). Some refused to believe that there is water above the heavens contrary to Genesis 1:7, which states that there is water above the firmament. Augustine concludes that, "The authority of Scripture in this matter is greater than all human ingenuity" (2.5.9). Yet he arrives at this conclusion after examining the scientific details behind the statement. His methodology does not require that biblical facts be accepted without reason; rather, that Scriptural truth cannot be superseded by human intellectualism. Throughout the commentary Augustine battles with the question of how this Scripture authority is seen in all parts of life.

## *ii. Accommodation*

The second introductory issue is the idea of accommodation: that is, the way in which God 'accommodates' unfathomable divine meaning into human language so that we may understand this divine meaning. This accommodation might involve God using imprecise human language.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> There is a brief discussion of Augustine and accommodation in Ford Lewis Battles, "God Was Accommodating Himself to Human Capacity," *Interpretation* **31** (1977): 19-38.

Augustine uses the tender image of a mother stooping to the level of a child.

Humanity struggles to understand the heights and depths of God, but Scripture helps him. “Scripture does not abandon you in your infirmity, but with a mother’s love accompanies your slower steps” (5.3.6).<sup>103</sup>

A result of this accommodation is that no subject is exhaustively examined in Scripture. For example Augustine has unresolved questions regarding how time unfolded during the six days of creation (5.8.23). He simply answers that there is no solution to these questions because the Holy Spirit did not choose to reveal it.

But as much has been told as was judged necessary by the Holy Spirit as He inspired the writer, who put down those things which would be important not only for a knowledge of what had happened but also for the foreshadowing of what was to be. In our ignorance we conjecture about possible events which the writer omitted knowingly. (5.8.23)

Yet Augustine is aware that these contradictions and questions that Scripture contains might lead a reader to “give up his faith or not approach the faith” (5.8.23).

Therefore,

In our efforts according to our limited ability we try with God’s help to see no absurdity or contradiction may be thought to be present in Sacred Scripture to offend the mind of the reader. (5.8.23)

Accommodation is important for Augustine’s hermeneutics because it aids the flexible approach to interpretation that he wants to promote. In addition to the

<sup>103</sup> 5.3.6. Augustine uses the image of children elsewhere, “the narrative of the inspired writer brings the matter down to the capacity of children” (2.6.13). Also, “God speaks to those who are unable to grasp his utterance” (8.27.49).

practical assistance that a flexible hermeneutic provides, it also enables Augustine to defend against those who seek to tarnish the authority of Scripture by exaggerated literal interpretation.<sup>104</sup> In his exegesis of Genesis, the idea of ‘accommodation’ is used primarily to defend against critics. In an overarching way it also brings a humble tone to the exegesis; it reminds the interpreter that he can never dominate the text.

### *b. History*

In modern biblical criticism, history is closely associated with the literal sense, and as history has come to be questioned, so the literal sense of Scripture has also been questioned. This has led to the demise of reading the plain sense of Scripture in many Divinity departments. As we have seen above, Augustine recognised the importance of defending the literal sense, and therefore the historical sense, to maintain the credibility of Scriptural authority.

Augustine defines the literal sense as “what happened” (9.12, 9.14). He highlights the importance of uncovering the historical details to decode the deep theological truths of Scripture which he is searching for. He understands that this may be an unnatural task for the impatient interpreter, “Our purpose now, however, is not to unfold hidden meanings but to establish what actually happened” (11.34).

The importance of history for Augustine’s interpretation is that it provides the basis for a symbolic meaning. He goes to great lengths to defend his belief in the historical narrative before seeking a symbolic meaning.<sup>105</sup> The history is clearly important to Augustine.

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<sup>104</sup> An example of this would be 2.9.22.

However a problem arises when we see Augustine's final interpretation because it is difficult to see how his pursuit of the historical account has benefited or even changed his interpretation. That is, on occasions where Augustine defends the historicity of an event and proceeds to interpret this event symbolically, his symbolic interpretation appears to gain very little from a defence of its history. This suggests that Augustine's keenness for historicity is to defend the Scriptural authority, rather than to enhance his interpretation. We may take the example of God making garments of skin for Adam and Eve (11.39.52). Despite the symbolic meaning of this event Augustine first acknowledges that it actually happened.

This was done [the garments of skin] for the sake of a symbolic meaning, but nonetheless it was done; and similarly the words which were spoken of a symbolic meaning were nonetheless spoken. (11.39.52)

For all intents and purposes this symbolic meaning is the same as the figurative meaning except that the event is not figurative. Thus when Augustine interprets the garments of skin he emphasises the importance of its historicity; yet proceeds to a figurative interpretation as if the text was obscure or unclear. In this case, he interprets the passage both historically and figuratively. There is a similar example in 6.7.12 where Augustine discusses the food for Adam and Eve.<sup>106</sup> Therefore, I suggest <sup>105</sup> This is clear in Augustine's discussion of the tree of Wisdom in 8.5.9. He defends the existence of the tree in history (whilst rejecting purely allegorical interpretations) then moves to give the symbolic meaning.

<sup>106</sup> Augustine takes the literal sense first, then feels free to find the figurative meaning, Finally, if anyone wishes to interpret this food in a figurative sense, he will be departing from the literal interpretation of the facts which should first be established in commenting on a narrative of this kind. (6.7.12)

that in these cases Augustine uses the literal meaning only to authenticate the historical account of Scripture, not for interpretative gain. This means that the figurative or symbolic meaning does not change regardless of the historicity of the event. Within Augustine's hermeneutical framework the literal interpretation is somewhat artificial because it does not have a significant role in his interpretive method apart from establishing the authority of the text.

*c.. The Text*

It has become popular to regard the literal as a text-centred interpretation.<sup>107</sup> This is primarily through narrative criticism, and it is the most important part of the literal interpretation for Augustine also.

He correctly identifies the question of genre as of primary importance when seeking the literal textual meaning. From the beginning of his exegesis, Augustine recognises the importance of genre and how different types of writing need to be handled accordingly,

In the case of a narrative of events, the question arises as to whether everything must be taken according to the figurative sense only, or whether it must be expounded and defended also as a faithful record of what happened.

(1.1.1)

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A similar sentiment is given with regard to the four rivers of Paradise,

We can, therefore, follow with simplicity the authority of Scripture in the narration of these historical realities, taking them first as true historical realities and then searching for any further meaning they may have. (8.7.13)

<sup>107</sup> Rather than, for example, historically or source centred.

He recognises how the allegorical interpretation of the Origen and the Alexandrian school had so dominated the hermeneutical landscape of the time that the genre of the text had been neglected.

The first question that the interpreter must ask is: what kind of text is this? The answer to this question will determine the expectations of the text. Different genres will have different expectations of the levels of meaning that may be taken,

The narrative in these books [Genesis] is not written in a literal style proper to allegory, as in the Cantic of Canticles, but from beginning to end in a style proper to history, as in the Books of Kings and other works of that type.

(8.1.2)

Paying attention to the genre is the primary hermeneutical principle of the exegete. Augustine shows that beyond this surface question are underlying complexities. For example, in a historical narrative it is possible for one figurative word or phrase to differ from the rest of the genre of the passage. Seldom is a passage uniformly one style. This is demonstrated in Genesis 3:7 where Adam and Eve have their eyes “opened”. Augustine interprets the figurative meaning of human eyes being opened to see their “bodies of death” (11.31.40). This one figurative word should not dictate the genre of the passage, nor should the word be made to conform to the wider style of the passage. Regarding the statement, “the eyes of both of them were opened”, Augustine comments, “Nevertheless, one should not take the whole passage in a figurative sense on the basis of one word used with a transferred meaning”

(11.31.41).<sup>108</sup> In addition to this, he is aware of the broader difficulty of common

<sup>108</sup> There is a similar example of a figurative interpretation of Psalm 153:6 “He established the earth above the waters” when discussing the creation of the earth in Genesis 1:6-7. Another case is the prophetic interpretation of Psalm 117:22, “the

human speech that can cause interpretive problems. The human writer of Scripture may use the common language of his time in a historical narrative. By recognising this, Augustine can explain why the author uses unusual language. For example, he raises the repetition of ideas in his interpretation of the phrase, “beasts, herds and quadrupeds” in Genesis 1:24-25. In a painfully close analysis of what each group includes, he resolves that the writer is simply using language “in keeping with the familiar habits of our ordinary speech” (3.11.17).

Augustine is meticulous in his analytical skills elsewhere also, through close word-by-word interpretation of passages. He believes in Scripture’s divine importance and unending depth, so that every word has significance and cannot be over analysed. Greene-McCreight notes that Augustine’s appreciation of “no textual dross in Holy Scripture” means that “no word or turn of phrase may be left unexamined.”<sup>109</sup> Indeed, Greene-McCreight goes further to explain how Augustine’s view of the importance of every word in Scripture lead him “performing grammatical and lexical gymnastics in order to attempt to explicate verbal meaning.”<sup>110</sup> In these examples the literal meaning is bound extremely closely to the wording of the text. From the wording of the text, Augustine is able to move to a figurative interpretation. This aspect of the literal sense differs from his pursuit of the historicity of the text in that his interpretation of the words of Scripture has a significant impact on his theological interpretation.

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stone rejected by the builders, which has become the head of the corner” (8.4.8.).

<sup>109</sup> *Ad Litteram*, 68.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

Augustine also prioritises God's direct speech in Scripture as more authoritative than the words of the human author. He gives a hermeneutical preference to the speech of God in the narrative, with the human narrator taking a slightly lower level. This is seen in God's curse to the serpent in Genesis 3:14-15.

This entire statement [the curse of the serpent] is made in figurative language, and the reliability of the writer and the truth of his narrative demand only that we do not doubt that the words were spoken. For the words, *The Lord God said to the serpent*, are the only words of the writer, and they are to be taken in the proper sense. (11.36.49).

The speech of God has a figurative sense and has a higher capacity for theological meaning. He believes that God has dictated direct speech to the human writer. It is not the case that he is lowering the authority of the human author of Scripture, but heightening the authority of direct divine speech.

#### *d.. The Canon*

In *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* Augustine's exegesis is broadly similar to his approach in other biblical books. Nevertheless, the apologetic nature of *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* alters his use of Scripture slightly. As has been demonstrated with *On Christian Teaching* and *The Spirit and the Letter*, Augustine accepts Scripture as a whole, with appreciation of the different writers and writings within the canon. Taking the text as a whole means that he has no problem allowing a verse from the Psalms, written in a different time, historical context and style, informing his understanding of Genesis. And although he takes into account that the Psalms are not historical narrative, he otherwise pays little attention to the differing historical setting of the verse or passage. In his interpretation of Genesis, this often involves allowing

the creation imagery from the Psalms and wisdom literature, or the theology of Paul to aid his reading.<sup>111</sup> An illustration of this point is his discussion of the creation of animals (3.15.24). He asks whether animals were created poisonous and dangerous, a potential problem to the perfectly good world God created. He concludes that it is reasonable to think that harmful animals were not created harmful, but they have become this way because sin entered the world. His logic is that humans are not perfect in a fallen world, so we can presume that animals have been affected by the fall also. To support his point he refers to passages from Paul, “Not that I have already obtained this, or already have been made perfect” (Phil. 3.12) and, “My grace is sufficient for you, for strength is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12.9). It becomes clear how he allows a wide range of biblical passages, from the Psalms to Pauline literature, to inform his interpretation of Genesis.

The principle behind this is that the authority of the wider canon should govern the interpretation of a particular text. And so, the use of the wider canon becomes part of his literal interpretation. In Greene-McCreight’s explanation of how Augustine uses the wider canon, she is keen to emphasise how he adds a ‘canonical’ level to the text, which goes beyond the surface meaning of the text as it is. In discussing how Augustine’s canonical reading enhances his literal interpretation, she comments, “Ultimately, Augustine’s ‘literal’ reading adds to the narrative an element which was at least not patent and at most missing from the verbal sense.”<sup>112</sup>

This hermeneutical tool of allowing Scripture to interpret Scripture is common in all Augustine’s works. There is a difference from *The Spirit and the Letter* because in

<sup>111</sup> Skimming the indexes of Taylor’s translation will demonstrate this point.

<sup>112</sup> *Ad Litteram*, 59.

*The Literal Meaning of Genesis* Augustine uses a wide range of canonical books to aid his interpretation of Genesis. This is in keeping with defending Genesis as part of the overall inspired material. It also causes Augustine to spend time showing how the message of Genesis harmonises with the wider canon. An illustration of his harmonisation is when he discusses the meaning of Psalm 104:2, that God “stretches out heaven like a skin” (2.9.20-22). This was often considered to conflict with the widely held view that the world was spherical. Augustine refers to Isaiah 40:22, which describes heaven as a canopy or vault, as potential friction in the text. To help stress the point he depicts an imaginary objector asking “Is not Scripture opposed to those who hold that heaven is spherical, when it says, *who stretches out heaven like a skin?*” (2.9.10). He provides a solution for the “doggedly literal-minded interpreters” (2.9.22).<sup>113</sup> His solution is that “a skin surely can be stretched out not only on a flat plane but also in a spherical shape” (2.9.22). In this way both passages can be upheld as literally true. He also harmonises in Book 10 regarding the origin of the soul. Within Book 10 he gives individual chapters to harmonising his interpretation with Wisdom 8:19-20, Psalm 104:29-30, Ecclesiastes 12:7 and Roman 5:12, 18-19 (10.7-11.12-19.). All these examples serve to validate the authority of Genesis, as well as to validate his own interpretation. In his interpretation we see how he seeks Biblical warrant to harmonise the text and support his exegesis.<sup>114</sup> Because of Augustine’s apologetic aim, his primary concern is to harmonise the wider canon with Genesis, and allowing Scripture to interpret Scripture becomes a secondary concern.

<sup>113</sup> He has already provided a figurative interpretation of this verse in the *Confession* 13.15.16.

<sup>114</sup> Earlier in Book 10, Augustine looks for biblical warrant for theories of the origin of the soul, “Let us, then, see which opinion is supported by the testimony of Scripture” (10.6.9).

*e.. Theology*

We have already touched upon theology and its tensions with the authority of Scripture. Now we will briefly see how Augustine uses theological probing to add to the literal sense. The term ‘theology’ for Augustine means biblical theology, or theology derived primarily from Scripture. He uses a systematised definition of God to aid and test his literal interpretation. Put simply, Augustine asks the big theological questions of the text. Such questions are: How can man understand the meaning of evil, before he has experienced it (8.16.34)? How does God, who is outside time and space, say ‘let there be light’ (1.2.4) or ‘speak’ (8.18.37) to Adam?<sup>115</sup> Is motion possible for God (8.22.43)? How was life created (9.16.30)? Why did God allow Adam to be tempted (11.4.6)? Why did God create those he foreknew would be wicked (11.8.10)? Why does God not convert the wills of evil men to good (11.10.13)? Why did God permit the Devil to enter the serpent (11.12.16)?

Thus the literal sense is closely tied to the theological meaning, going far beyond a historical or textual study. This is because Augustine first sees Scripture as theology, not history or narrative. Therefore it is imperative that when seeking the literal sense of Scripture the theological questions are raised. Indeed at some points Augustine becomes so involved in the theology that one wonders how the text raised these questions at all.<sup>116</sup>

<sup>115</sup> Cf. 8.27.49 and 9.2.3.

<sup>116</sup> An example of this would be Augustine’s discussion of the origin of the soul in Book 8.

*f. Christian Life*

Another component of Augustine's interpretation is its meaning for the Christian life. If Scripture is first and foremost theological, its purpose, in either the literal meaning or the figurative, is the betterment of believers. Augustine is concerned that critics of Scripture will turn frail Christians away from God's Word by their highly academic discussion and disrespect of the nature of Scripture. It is because of his concern for the weak that this interpretation of Genesis is so important to Augustine.

But more dangerous is the error of certain weak brethren who faint away when they hear these irreligious critics learnedly and eloquently discoursing on the theories of astronomy or on any of the questions relating to the elements of this universe...and they [the weak brethren] return with disdain to the books which were written for the good of their souls; and, although they ought to drink from these books with relish, they can scarcely bear to take them up.

(1.20.40)

This is an example of Augustine following the Rule of Charity, as we will see later. Nevertheless it is worth emphasising that for Augustine Scripture is God's Word to his Church. An important hermeneutical concern is the nourishment of Christian souls.

*g. Secular Thought*

The final component to be addressed is how Augustine uses secular thought in his pursuit of the literal meaning. In his exegesis, secular thought is both a friend and a

fiend for Augustine. It is a friend if it aids and abets Scripture's authority, but is a fiend if it does not.

On the one hand, Augustine finds that arithmetic aids his interpretation that God created an ordered and perfect world. God creates the world in six days because six is mathematically a perfect number (the addition of its factors corresponds to the number; 4.2.2). And so God creates the perfect world, in the perfect number of days. On the other hand, astrologers and their "so-called scientific observations" must be avoided (2.17.35). Greene-McCreight notes that Augustine's concern is not with their scientific method, but with their stern rejection of Scriptural authority. She comments that Augustine, "admits that this is ultimately not because of the astrologers' lack of 'scientific observations' but their 'headstrong impiety' which distorts the Rule of Faith."<sup>117</sup> Therefore, Augustine is willing to accept secular knowledge as good for interpretation if at the outset it submits to the authority of Scripture.

For those who wish to uphold a certain interpretation of the science of creation Augustine warns,

That would be to battle not for the teaching of Holy Scripture but for our own, wishing its teaching to conform to ours, whereas we ought to wish ours to conform to that of Sacred Scripture. (1.18.32)

This underlines Augustine's view of the self-authenticating authority of Scripture.<sup>118</sup>

In this respect Scripture should influence science, not *vice versa*.

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<sup>117</sup> *Ad Litteram*, 75, quoting 2.17.35.

<sup>118</sup> Cf. 80.

#### *h. Summary of Hermeneutical Principles*

As we have seen there are many different dimensions to Augustine's understanding of the literal sense, although we must remember that Augustine's exegesis is driven by an apologetic objective and at times this blurs the literal meaning. Ultimately this is because Augustine links the credibility of Scripture with the defence of the literal sense. There are eleven hermeneutical rules and principles we have discovered.

- (i) The first hermeneutical principle is that in the proper order of interpretation the literal sense should be sought first. Beyond this point the figurative sense may be sought.
- (ii) The literal sense is the most obvious and self-evident meaning of Scripture unless this meaning is absurd or contradicts the authority of Scripture. These observations serve Augustine's high view of Scripture.
- (iii) If an interpretation is absurd and/or contradicts the authority of Scripture, a figurative interpretation should be found.
- (iv) The historical events narrated in Scripture will often reflect a deeper symbolic meaning.
- (v) The first question to ask of any biblical text is what genre it is. This will allow the reader to have certain expectations about how much literal or figurative meaning it contains.
- (vi) Every word is inspired and therefore the text should be finely examined, word-by-word, for meaning.
- (vii) The meaning of the text will not given in one passage, but the whole of the biblical material should be studied on any particular issue.

- (viii) The text has been accommodated for the sake of the human readers and this should humble the exegete lest he thinks that he can rule the text.
- (ix) The literal sense should go beyond the historical or textual to the theological meaning of the text.
- (x) Scripture is for the nourishment of the Christian and this must be upheld in any interpretation.
- (xi) Finally, secular thought can be helpful in advancing the constructive interpretation of Scripture, but may also be dangerous in leading Christians to stop leading on Scripture to lean on science instead.

## **2. Boundaries of the Literal Sense**

Within the literal sense Augustine sets two boundaries for possible interpretation. The Rule of Faith is concerned with the ecclesiastical boundaries of an interpretation, whereas the Rule of Charity, which is subtler in Augustine's exegesis guards against interpretations that do not build up love in the brethren.

### *a. The Rule of Faith*

We have already seen how the authority of Scripture guides the reader. On a broader level, Augustine appeals to an ecclesiastical guide as a boundary to his hermeneutics. This is called the Rule of Faith. This collection of doctrines ensures that the interpretation remains within orthodox Christianity. Augustine describes this Rule in generic terms, such as, 'the faith' or 'beliefs of the catholic church'. We cannot draw any firmer description of which specific doctrines he has in mind with these

statements.<sup>119</sup> For our purposes it is enough to recognise that he believes interpretation should be influenced and governed by the faith of the Church.

A proper definition of the Rule of Faith is the Christian faith, taught in the Bible and upheld by the Church. Although this is vague, Augustine does not provide clearer definition. This means that the Rule of Faith is biblical before it is ecclesial. We must distance ourselves from the view that the Rule of Faith is a set of Church traditions that have little to do with Scripture and true Christian faith. Augustine realises that if Scripture is discredited, then the Christian faith is discredited. When speaking about those who attack Scripture with science, he comments,

But when they produce from any of their books a theory contrary to Scripture, and therefore contrary to the Catholic faith, either we shall have some ability to demonstrate that it is absolutely false, or at least we ourselves will hold it so without any shadow of a doubt. (1.21.41)

The interpretation of Scripture is bound to the Catholic faith and the Catholic faith is bound to Scripture. And when these are questioned Augustine calls his readers to look for a solution and if that cannot be found, to hold on to the Catholic faith with unresolved questions. In this sense, the Rule of Faith should even rule over destructive criticisms of Scripture.

This Rule of Faith is not only biblical, but it is also handed down through the tradition of the Church. The faith of the apostles of the New Testament is now passed on to the Church to uphold. The Church is the rightful heir to apostolic teaching. Augustine

<sup>119</sup> Others, such as Tertullian, had been firmer with what the Rule of Faith consisted of.

It would be interesting to see if Augustine's and Tertullian's view of the Rule of Faith coincided, but that is for another study.

seeks to sustain this teaching in his interpretation of Scripture. An example of this is in Augustine's discussion of the origin of the soul. He is wary that "we may not find ourselves contradicting the faith as handed down by St. Paul" (10.7.12).<sup>120</sup> As much as the Church is the rightful heir to the apostolic faith, she is also the rightful defender of this faith. And the proper defence involves the guarded interpretation of Scripture. Indeed the definition of a heretic is: those who have an interpretation of the Scriptures not consistent with the Catholic faith as summarised in the creeds (7.9.13).

Augustine uses the Rule of Faith in different ways. As we would expect, it serves as a guard against false interpretations. The soul of man and the possibility for transformation is a simple example of this. "But that any body, earthly or heavenly, is changed into soul and becomes an incorporeal being is not to my knowledge held by anyone and is not part of our faith" (7.12.19). In another example, Augustine actually argues for the historical reading of a text exactly because it does not contravene the Rule of Faith (8.1.1). This is when Augustine discusses whether Paradise is a real place. Not only does he believe that the narrative affirms the existence of Paradise, but there is no firm reason to believe otherwise.

But if accepting these statements in a material sense not only does not impede the understand of the narrative but actually helps it, there will be none, I think, so headstrong in disbelief as to see the proper sense to be in agreement with the rule of faith. (8.1.4)

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<sup>120</sup> In similar statements Augustine refers to "Scripture...as the Church has recognized" (5.5.15) and "that certain things written down should be revealed in due time to his servants by tradition handed down through succeeding generations" (9.13.23).

Nevertheless, because an interpretation is within the Rule of Faith, it does mean it is acceptable. On one occasion, he refers to an interpretation that is within the Rule of Faith as “ridiculous” (11.41.57). This refers to the place and existence of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the garden.

Now if these writers should wish to understand the tree not in the proper sense as a real tree with real fruit but in a figurative sense, their interpretation could result in a theory apparently consistent with faith and reason. (11.41.56)

In this case the Rule of Faith is an outer boundary of acceptable interpretations, but cannot be a direct guide for interpretations.

Greene-McCreight has pointed out how the Rule of Faith may also add a new layer of meaning to an interpretation.<sup>121</sup> She points to the example of the Trinitarian interpretation of Genesis 1:1-2, commenting, “It is not so much the text itself but the orthodox understanding of the Trinity which generates this interpretation.”<sup>122</sup>

A final issue worth noting is that the Rule of Faith covers Church practices as well as doctrine, and in particular baptism. In the case of the origin of the soul, Augustine allows his interpretation to be directed by the practice of infant baptism. Of course the practice of infant baptism is closely tied to the doctrine of original sin. He is unwilling to accept any interpretation that might jeopardise the validity of this practice. Indeed Augustine appears bullish about the place of baptism,

But the custom of our mother the Church in the matter of infant baptism is by no means to be scorned, nor to be considered at all superfluous, nor to be

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<sup>121</sup> *Ad litteram*, 53.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*

believed except on the ground that it is a tradition from the apostles.

(10.23.39)

The faithfulness to infant baptism impacts Augustine's understanding of soul and allows him only to affirm solutions that allow for original sin and infant baptism. As is clear in the Pelagian debate, the practice of infant baptism was important to appeal to the broader ecclesial audience.<sup>123</sup>

The Rule of Faith plays a very significant role as an outer boundary for any interpretation of Scripture. It is particularly important for the literal sense because there is greater opportunity in the text to contradict this Rule, whereas in figurative interpretation these problems of the plain sense do not arise as easily.

*b. The Rule of Charity*

The other Rule that Augustine employs is the Rule of Charity. This Rule is not as evident or controlling in *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* as the Rule of Faith.

Because Scripture is God's Word for the Church, it must serve to nurture the reader's love for God and love of his neighbour. In the broadest sense, this is Augustine's aim in the whole of the exegesis. He wants to defend the credibility of Scripture, so that "weak brethren" might not lose faith in Scripture (1.20.40). The closeness of the interpretation is because:

Holy Scripture, indeed, speaks in such a way as to mock proud readers with its heights, terrify the attentive with its depths, feed great souls with its truth and nourish little ones with sweetness. (5.3.6.)

<sup>123</sup> As has been demonstrated in my earlier chapter on *The Spirit and the Letter*, the Pelagius and his followers were dismissed at the popular level because Augustine was able to show that their views lead to a rejection of infant baptism.

It is difficult to see the firm boundaries of this Rule in the exegesis. But with the Rule as articulated in *On Christian Teaching*, we can more easily identify how it plays a similar role in Augustine's interpretation of Genesis.<sup>124</sup>

A clear case of this is the interpretation of "the Spirit of God was stirring above the water" (1.7.13). Here Augustine directs his readers to the fact that love is generally given from a higher being to a "needy or poor" being. That is why the Spirit of God stirs above the waters "so that God may be thought of as loving the work to be produced not out of any need or necessity, but solely out of the largeness of His bounty." This is why Paul "begins his discourse on charity by saying that he will point out *a superior way*."<sup>125</sup> This shows how Augustine is keen to raise the love of God and love of neighbour in his exegesis.

The Rule of Charity guards against interpretations that raise doubts about the role and importance of Scripture. And it also directs the interpreter to seek a solution that builds up the love of God and neighbour.

## **Conclusion**

The literal interpretation of Genesis draws our attention to several hermeneutical principles as well as two hermeneutical boundaries that Augustine employs during his exegesis. We have seen that the literal meaning is the obvious sense of Scripture. However, the obvious sense of a divinely inspired text must not only include an appreciation of history and narrative, but also the theological and spiritual dimension of the text. The Rules of Faith and Charity provide the necessary boundaries to keep

<sup>124</sup> *On Christian Teaching* 1.86.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.* The biblical quote (in italics) is from Vulgate translation of 1 Cor. 12:31.

exegetes within Christian interpretation. In *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, the literal sense is used as an apologetic tool. And at times Augustine finds the literal sense somewhat banal and unnatural to him. However his wider concern for the authority of Scripture and the value of Scripture for individual Christians and the Church ultimately impels him to exegete Genesis in a way that brings his readers to the “nourishing kernel” that Scripture is (1.20.40).

## Chapter 4: The Enchiridion

Augustine was a humble man. Nowhere is this more demonstrated than in *The Enchiridion on Faith, Hope and Love* (c.422). In his late sixties he responded to a request from his “dearest Laurence” (1)<sup>126</sup> for a handbook on the Christian faith. Laurence did not want another book for the shelf, but a pocket guide of the great matters of faith. Augustine praises Laurence for his passion for wisdom. Augustine is the most influential writer in the Church at that time, yet he still devotes time to this simple task. However, the greatest demonstration of his humility is in relationship to Scripture and the Church. In the *Enchiridion* he shows his submission to these two great pillars of the Christian faith. This will be the focus of interest in this final chapter.

Augustine summarises Laurence’s original request as “How God is to be worshipped” (2). Indeed he further develops the agenda of the *Enchiridion* as,

What we should seek above all, what we should chiefly seek to avoid because of the various heresies there are, to what extent reason comes to the support of religion, what lies outside the scope of reason and belongs to faith alone, what should be held first and last, what the whole body of doctrine amounts to, and what is a sure and suitable foundation of the Catholic faith. (4)

In Augustine’s opinion a handbook of how God is worshipped should focus on faith and reason, despite the subtitle ‘Faith, Hope and Love’. The reader is not told why a discussion of faith disproportionately dwarfs the discussions of hope and love (discussion of faith runs from chapter 9-113, hope 114-116 and love 117-121), but the

<sup>126</sup> All quotes and paragraph references are from *The Augustine Catechism: The Enchiridion on Faith, Hope, and Love*, trans. by Boniface Ramsey, 4<sup>th</sup> printing, 2003.

role of faith provides ample opportunity to examine the role of Scripture in faith, particularly in relation to the Creed.<sup>127</sup> The short accounts of hope and love also provide insight.

## 1. Overview of Text

‘Faith, hope and love’ is Augustine’s simple answer to how God should be worshipped (3). He begins his handbook by discussing the relationship of these three great attributes (5-8). To open he says faith must be first; Christ is the foundation of this faith, and sight is its final goal (5). We have faith that one day we may see. This goes some way to explaining Augustine’s emphasis on faith in the rest of the treatise.

Augustine knows that many heretics claim the name of Christ, but do not believe in true Christian faith (5). This leads to an apologetic concern in his writing to defend the true Christian faith. Nevertheless, in typical Augustinian fashion, his ultimate aim in defending the faith is not apologetics, but love.<sup>128</sup>

For this it is necessary, not that your hand be filled with a brief handbook, but that your heart be set on fire with great love. (6)<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> My opinion is to accept a suggestion by Ramsey that faith is largest because it is “most “teachable” ”, moreover, it is the cognitive foundation on which hope and love are based (Ramsey, “Introduction” in *The Augustine Catechism*, 13).

<sup>128</sup> As we have seen, this closely resembles *On Christian Teaching* (1.86) “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.”

<sup>129</sup> Later he comments, “Without [love] faith has no value” (8).

Augustine hooks his treatise to the Creed of the Church and the Lord's Prayer. Both of these connect faith, hope and love. He explains the connection in the following way.

Faith believes, hope and love pray. But hope and love cannot be without faith, and so faith prays as well. (7)

The result is an interdependence of faith, hope and love; one cannot exist without the other (8).

Augustine's discussion of faith revolves around a creed. It is difficult to ascertain which specific creed Augustine was using because he never directly quotes or names the creed. Ramsey is right to suggest that Augustine may be using two creeds: the creeds from Milan and Hippo.<sup>130</sup> The general way in which Augustine refers to the creed suggests there is fluidity between the creeds of Catholic churches and dioceses. That is, although the wording of separate creeds might differ, the general ideas and doctrines remain the same. Augustine alludes to both the Creed of Milan and the Creed of Hippo without feeling the need to inform the reader when he is quoting from one and when he is quoting from the other, as Ramsey shows.<sup>131</sup>

<sup>130</sup> Ramsey, "Introduction", 14.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 15. An example of the Milanese Creed is also given:

I believe in God the Father almighty;  
And in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was born of the Holy Spirit  
And the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified and was  
buried, ascended into heaven, sits at the right hand of the Father, whence he will  
come to judge the living and the dead;  
And in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Church, the forgiveness of sins, the  
resurrection of the flesh.

Broadly speaking, Augustine's discussion of faith follows the creed in structure: God the Creator (9-22); the role and person of Christ (23-55); the place of the Church (56-64); forgiveness of sins (65-83); and the resurrection of the flesh (84-113).

The section on hope (114-116) is based around the Lord's Prayer. Augustine uses the seven petitions in the Gospel of Matthew and the five petitions in the Gospel of Luke to describe the hope that comes through faith: hope that covers both the eternal and the temporal.

The final section regards love (117-121). Love is a measure of true faith and hope, "For one who rightly loves without doubt rightly believes and hopes" (117).<sup>132</sup> The progress towards love is seen in the development of the four stages of humanity,<sup>133</sup> beginning with "deepest darkness of ignorance" and ending in the resurrection of the flesh (118). Thus Augustine concludes that although faith is first in sequence, love is first in importance (117). The *Enchiridion* uses faith as a starting point to lead to the great goal of love.

## **2. Augustine's Practical use of Scripture**

Augustine handles Scripture in the *Enchiridion* in a similar way to the rest of his writing.

### a. Scripture quotation

<sup>132</sup> This echoes love as a measure for interpretation in *On Christian Teaching* 1.86-88.

<sup>133</sup> These four stages are: (i) ignorance, (ii) knowledge of sin, (iii) the good that is hoped for, and (iv) the fulfilment of this hope, which is the resurrection of the flesh.

He frequently quotes scripture in his short handbook, with almost two hundred references throughout. And like his other works he shows varying degrees of sensitivity to textual context and authorial intent. The two extremes are, on the one hand, *close exegetical examination*<sup>134</sup> and, on the other hand, *liberal use* of biblical texts to support his argument. There are obviously many examples between these two extremes.

An example of Augustine's *close reading* of the text is his interpretation of Romans 5:16-6:11 (50-53). He is discussing the role of Christ in our rebirth and baptism. He follows Paul's argument from how sin entered the world through one man (5:16) and how one man, Christ, brought life (5:18). This has led to life in Christ and death to sin (Augustine quotes the whole of Romans 6:1-11). Augustine also demonstrates this close reading in examining the person of Christ as the Word made flesh, born of the Virgin Mary (34-37). His debate revolves around what it means that the Word is made flesh. He explains how this primarily means the Word is full of grace by quoting John 1:1, 14 and alluding to Philippians 2:6-11 (35). This is where the "great grace which is God's alone is here plainly shown" (36). He similarly demonstrates the nature of the virgin birth with reference to both the Gospels of Luke and Matthew (37).<sup>135</sup> Finally we can see Augustine's appreciation for a text and its context in his response to 1 Timothy 2:4, that God "wills everyone to be saved" (103). This is a problem text raised after the discussion of the role of good and evil and God's

<sup>134</sup> Of course, 'close exegetical examination' is a relative term. Augustine may not show the level of depth we expect, but the point is that he shows varying degrees of interpretative sensitivity to the context.

<sup>135</sup> Alternatively Augustine shows his close reading of the text when interpreting 2 Cor. 5:20-21 where Christ is called sin (41).

gracious salvation, as we will see below. Important for us to see is that Augustine studies the surrounding context (1 Tim. 2:1-4) to resolve the answer. He does not explain it away using systematic theology, as an easier option would be.

At the other end of the spectrum, Augustine uses the biblical text in a *liberal* way. At some points this looks as if he is simply incorporating biblical language to his argument (such as in chapter 17 with Matt. 5:37). At other points Augustine alludes to a verse without a direct quote and the reader is unsure to what extent Augustine is referring to this passage for support or simply using biblical language (e.g. *Ench.* 35 cf. Phil. 2:6-11). At other stages Augustine appears to clumsily merge two texts. He quotes “But our God is above in heaven; in heaven and on earth he hath done all things whatsoever that he would” (95).<sup>136</sup> This merges half of Psalm 115:3 and half of Psalm 135:6. It would seem Augustine is quoting from memory here and shows little effort to be exact in his quotation or reference.<sup>137</sup>

#### *b. Clearer texts enlightening unclear texts*

Allowing clearer texts to shed light on unclear texts is another common strategy of Augustine’s that is seen in the *Enchiridion*. This takes two forms; texts are unclear either because they are *complex texts* or *problem texts*. These can be distinguished by Augustine’s starting point. A *complex text* begins with an unclear text and looks to clearer texts to resolve the problem. However, with an unclear *problem text*

<sup>136</sup> Quote from Albert C. Outler, *Enchiridion of Faith, Hope, and Love*. Unfortunately Ramsey’s translation glosses over this merger and simply quotes Ps 115:3.

<sup>137</sup> At these points Augustine resembles how C.H. Spurgeon described John Bunyan, “Prick him anywhere; and you will find that his blood is Bibline, the very essence of the Bible flows from him.”

Augustine states his position on a certain matter with clear texts, and then introduces a text that appears to contradict this position as a *problem text*. He solves a *problem text* by showing how clearer texts shed new light on this problem text. These two types of unclear text are also separated by the result of the interpretation. The end result of these two interpretations is different. The result of a *complex text* is to understand the meaning of a text when the meaning is obvious. However, a *problem text* is primarily an apologetic challenge and does not add to Augustine's meaning but to overcome any potential criticism. Generally speaking, in the *Enchiridion*, unclear texts tend to be *problem texts* rather than *complex texts*, showing how Augustine wishes to defend his position rather than look for new meaning in unclear texts.

One example of an unclear *problem text* is his discussion of 1 Timothy 2:4 (103) as referred to above.<sup>138</sup> Augustine has already discussed the forgiveness of sins (64-83) and continues to discuss the resurrection of the dead; in particular he draws attention to the resurrection of the lost to eternal damnation (92) and the will of God to save those whom he chooses (94-99). This includes many textual references climaxing with Romans 9. He introduces unclear *problem texts* first in chapter 97 then more fully in 103. This text raises the following problem.

Since not all are saved, but many more are not saved, it seems that what God wills to happen does not happen because a human will frustrates the will of God. (97)

The common explanation that the lost 'frustrate the will of God' does not match what is possible for an omnipotent God.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Other examples of unclear problem texts can be found in: 15 (Matt 7:18), 91 (1 Cor. 15:44), 110 (2 Cor. 5:10), 112 (Matt. 25:46).

Where is that omnipotence that has done whatever it willed in heaven and earth [Psalm 115:3] if he willed to gather together the children of Jerusalem and did not do so? (97)

Augustine's resolution is found in the clear text of John 1:9 ("who enlightens everyone who comes into the world") and the context of the rest of the chapter of 1 Timothy 2:4. He shows that this passage is to help the Christian in prayer. The clearer passage of John 1:9 uses similarly inclusive language of God's call, but does not mean that all will be saved, but simply that many people will be enlightened and saved by God. The emphasis of John 1:9 is that God will enlighten all kinds of people. This idea is transferred to the word 'everyone' in 1 Timothy 2:4. It should be understood as meaning that God wills that 'all kinds of people' be saved rather than every single person. And so this furthers the idea of prayer seen in the earlier verses of 1 Timothy 2:1-2. Augustine uses the clearer passage of John 1:9, and to some extent the clearer verses around 1 Timothy 2:4, to resolve this *problem text* in order that his original assertion, that God will save the redeemed by grace, should not be dismissed.

An example of an unclear *complex text* is in Chapter 75. This section discusses the forgiveness of sins and whether people can be clean simply by almsgiving. Augustine raises the *complex text* of Luke 11:37-41 ("But for the rest, give alms and see, everything is clean for you", v. 41<sup>140</sup>). The complexity of this text is that it appears to

<sup>139</sup> Augustine does suggest that Matt. 23:37 ("How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!") would support this position, but does not accept it because of God's omnipotence.

<sup>140</sup> This is Ramsey's translation of Augustine's biblical quotation.

suggest that if a person gives alms all will be clean for him. There are two texts that Augustine raises to shed light on this text: “in cleansing their hearts by faith” (Acts 15:9) and, “but to the corrupt and unbelieving nothing is pure. Their very minds and consciences are corrupted” (Tit. 1:15). These texts show that in Luke 11:41 Jesus is referring to true spiritual alms. Therefore Augustine explains the meaning behind Luke 11:14 as Jesus saying to the Pharisees that it is not their religious practices that are important, but what is present in their hearts.

For I know about these alms of yours [of mint and rue and herbs of all kinds (Luke 11:42)], so do not think I was exhorting you about those, *and you neglect justice and the love of God*, the alms by which you could be cleansed from every inner defilement, so that the physical objects that you wash might also be clean to you. (76)

Jesus is saying that almsgiving should begin with the heart and this is the problem of the Pharisees. It is the clearer texts of Acts 14:9 and Titus 1:15 that provide a solution to the *complex text* of Luke 11:37-41, and thus develop to Augustine’s point that worship from the heart is more important than empty religious practices.

Before moving on, there are two observations worth making regarding Augustine’s hermeneutic of allowing clear texts to illuminate less clear texts. Firstly, it is not obvious what is a clear or plain text and what is an unclear text, but appears to be up to the reader’s discernment. Augustine allows clear texts to dictate his interpretation of unclear ones, however in these passages there is little explanation of why one is clear and the other is unclear. Therefore there is no reason why one passage should interpret the other, rather than vice versa. For example he uses John 1:9 to explain how ‘everyone’ should be interpreted in 1 Timothy 2:4. However, he does not defend

why the ‘everyone’ in 1 Timothy 2:4 should not be used to explain John 1:9. This results in a dangerous level of exegetical licence, whereby the interpreter can choose which texts he deems to be clear, and therefore which will form the basis of his interpretations. For the above example, the Rule of Faith would affirm the damnation of the sinful and prove Augustine right in his interpretation. However, for less significant texts it is not obvious which should be taken as the clear text and which should be taken as the unclear text.

The second observation is simpler: Augustine believes that the whole canon of Scripture is coherent and self-authenticating. The coherency of Scripture is seen in his desire to confront and resolve unclear texts, and in particular *problem texts* that directly attack the coherency of Scripture. *Problem texts* in the *Enchiridion* could often be bypassed without any loss of argument. However, Augustine raises these problem texts (such as 1 Tim. 2:4), because he is keen to defend the coherency of Scripture, even in a basic book like the *Enchiridion*. Moreover, when Augustine allows for Scripture to interpret Scripture, this demonstrates his belief that Scripture possesses the solutions to its own problems. To authenticate Scripture, the reader does not need to look outside of Scripture, but within Scripture itself. The result is that Scripture is viewed as a self-contained work that needs no other support.

### *c. Sensitivity to the wider Biblical Canon*

Finally Augustine’s use of Scripture shows how he handles the text as a canonical whole. There are two types of interpretation that show Augustine’s appreciation of the whole biblical corpus: *comparison* of biblical texts and *evidence* from other

biblical texts. The following examples demonstrate once again Augustine's belief in the coherency of the canon, as well as its unity.

The clearest example of Augustine comparing biblical texts is in his interpretation of the Lord's Prayer (114-116). He compares the seven petitions of the Gospel of Matthew, with the five petitions of the Gospel of Luke. Luke is "showing us by his brevity how Matthew's seven petitions are to be understood" (116). The shortness of Luke's account aids the reader in his interpretation. For example,

The name of God is hallowed in the spirit, but God's kingdom will come in the resurrection of the flesh. So Luke, to show that the third petition [your will be done] was in a sense a repetition of the two preceding ones, made us understand it better by omitting it. (116)

This also explains why Luke excludes Matthew's last petition 'but rescue us from the evil one.' The reason is "to show us its connection with the preceding one which concerns temptation" (116). By comparing texts to aid our understanding, Augustine again shows how different authors and narratives can inform the reader's understanding of Scripture, without a major consideration of the historical and narrative background of the respective passages.

Augustine compares texts within the canon, but he also quotes passages from the span of the canon to support his point. For example to illustrate the wrath of God to come, he quotes from the Book of Psalms and Job, the Gospel of John and the Epistle to the Ephesians (33). This results in a broad scope of evidence for God's wrath coming upon humanity. By placing the Old Testament wisdom of Job and the Book of Psalms on the same level as the New Testament writings, we see how Augustine has

left the Manichaeism of his youth and sees the Old Testament as equal with the New. There is no hint of preferring one text to another.

Through Augustine's use of the whole canon, we can observe two things. First, he uses Scripture to interpret Scripture. A text should not be read in isolation, but as part of the whole canon of Scripture. We can conclude that Augustine did not believe in many biblical theologies, but in one biblical theology. Secondly, we can see that Augustine puts equal weight on the whole of the canon. He happily quotes Old Testament literature alongside the Gospels and Pauline literature. Pauline literature is quoted more frequently because the systematic account of grace and sin in Romans is the topic of Augustine's handbook, but he views the whole of Scripture as a united whole, all with equal weight.

### **3. Scripture and Augustine's response: Faith, Hope and Love**

To Laurence's request for a handbook on the essentials of the Christian faith, Augustine's response is simple,

If I answer that God is to be worshiped with faith, hope and love, you will certainly say that this is a shorter answer than you wished for. (3)

The triad of faith, hope and love is the basis for the whole of the *Enchiridion*, but for Augustine it is more than an endearing biblical expression for the Christian life. The bishop uses this biblical phrase to summarise the foundation of Christianity. It is worth noting that the basis of his handbook is not a creedal phrase or a well constructed theme sentence, but a biblical phrase, highlighting that at the foundation of his discussion is a biblical phrase. This method of using a biblical expression as an overarching motto, which then leads to unpacking a much larger idea, resonates with *The Spirit and the Letter*. In *On the Spirit and the Letter* Augustine uses 2

Corinthians 3:6, “the letter kills, but the spirit gives life”, as a hermeneutical motto that is the gateway to understand the message of the Book of Romans. In both *On the Spirit and the Letter* and the *Enchiridion* this method is more than a heuristic tool, more than a helpful peg to hook his writing on. Augustine believes he is unearthing the deeper meanings contained in these biblical expressions.

At a fundamental level this reflects Augustine’s belief in the infinite depth of Scripture. He can probe one verse to reveal a level of meaning unseen by a surface reading. Importantly, Augustine believes that one phrase contains all this meaning. In *On the Spirit and the Letter* he sees 2 Corinthians 3:6 containing what is explained at greater length in Romans. Similarly in the *Enchiridion* he believes that 1 Corinthians 13:13 contains all the meaning of the Creed, the hope that it points too, and its goal which is love.

The fact that so much meaning can be put into one verse is easier to see in *On the Spirit and the Letter* than in the *Enchiridion*. In *On the Spirit and the Letter* Augustine shows a greater concern for the context of the verse in the rest of 2 Corinthians and the Pauline corpus, therefore it is easier to see how he can justify so much meaning in one phrase. Nevertheless there is no reason to suggest that in the *Enchiridion* Augustine has a different attitude when using 1 Corinthians 13:13. The main difference between the *Enchiridion* and *On the Spirit and the Letter* is that in *On the Spirit and the Letter* 2 Corinthians 3:6 is unpacked via another biblical text (Romans) en route to the theological meaning, whereas in the *Enchiridion*, 1 Corinthians 13:13 is unpacked via the ecclesiastical creed en route to the goal of faith, hope and love. So it is clear to understand why in the *Enchiridion* Augustine shows

less concern for the biblical context of 1 Corinthians 13:13. It is because he is concentrating on the theological and ecclesiastical meaning in the text.

The triad of faith, hope and love are intricately related. Although Augustine deals with them in three distinct sections, he begins by stressing the relatedness of them all. The issue of dependency is important.

So love cannot exist without hope nor hope without love, nor can either exist without faith. (8)

Love and hope are co-dependant and both rely on faith. Of the three attributes, Augustine presents faith as less dependent upon and more of a precursor to love and hope. He establishes this fact with quotes from James 2:19 (“Even the demons believe – and shudder”) and Galatians 5:6 (“the faith that works through love”). Faith is the first step in the Christian path, but if no further steps are taken, this faith is useless. Hope and love do not have this primacy. The free standing nature of faith further leads to the conclusion that Augustine weights so much of the *Enchiridion* towards faith to enable his readers to correctly take the first step on the Christian path.

Apart from dependency Augustine links these three in two other ways. First, they are all connected through prayer. He directs his readers to Romans 10:14 (“But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed?”) to show how faith, hope and love are to be understood in relation to prayer. The Christian calls to God in prayer through hope and love, but these are both dependant on faith.

...faith believes, hope and love pray. But hope and love cannot be without faith, and so faith prays as well. (7)

Indeed he explains, “This is why we have the Creed.” The Creed shows in whom the one who prays should believe in. Dependency is again important to this connection.

A second connection is the unseen nature of both faith and hope. Faith is the name given to unseen truths and doctrines in the present reality, while hope is the name for those “good things” in the future (8). He continues,

“The fact that we do not see either the things we believe in or those we hope for makes not seeing a feature that faith and hope have in common.” (8)

In all this Augustine is keen that his readers understand these three as a whole. His focus on faith in the bulk of the handbook is because he wants it to lead to hope and love in the heart of the reader. Faith has no intrinsic value on its own and hope and love are impossible on their own. Augustine wants to commend all three of these attributes to his reader as an inseparable and complete package. And he commends these attributes as the instruction from Scripture for the Christian.

#### **4. Faith, the Creed and Scripture**

Augustine uses the Creed as his structure to explain what faith is. He believes that when the Apostle refers to faith he means the doctrines that would be later articulated in the Creed. His explanation can be roughly split into five sections: God the Creator (9-22); the role and person of Christ (23-55); the place of the Church (56-64); forgiveness of sins (65-83); and the resurrection of the flesh (84-113).<sup>141</sup> We will briefly look at each to understand how the Creed and Scripture relate in his explanation. We will concentrate on the Milanese Creed because it appears to have most in common with the Creed Augustine is using. This was also the Creed which

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<sup>141</sup> These are based on the helpful subtitles given in Ramsey’s translation.

Augustine confessed at his own baptism and has been reconstructed through Augustine's own writings.<sup>142</sup>

*a. God the Creator (9-22)*

The Milanese Creed begins, like many other creeds: I believe in God the Father almighty. Augustine starts by stating that God is the source of all good. His exploration of this topic involves a discussion of good, evil and the grey area of deliberate and accidental error. Although this discussion seems tangential and philosophical in places, there are important reasons for Augustine raising these issues. They are particularly important in light of his Manichaean past: his former faith that believed in dualism and absolute evil.<sup>143</sup> The attraction of dualism is that it resolved the problem of evil by suggesting two cosmic powers wrestling for a person's soul. However in dualism there was no place for an omnipotent good power and an almighty Creator.

Augustine counters dualism by showing that the Christian God is the creator of all things and evil is the "removal of good" (11). Evil exists because the good things that God creates are corruptible (12) and susceptible to becoming evil. The next issue that Augustine confronts is whether ignorance and error should be counted as evil. In

<sup>142</sup> The Creed of Milan from *Sermones* 212-14: *Credo in Deum Patrem omnipotentem, et in Jesum Christum, Filium eius unicum, Dominum nostrum, qui natus est de Spiritu Sancto et virgine Maria, passus est sub Pontio Pilato, crucifixus et sepultus; tertia die resurrexit a mortuis, ascendit in caelum, sedet ad dexteram Patris; inde venturus est judicare vivos et mortuos; et in Spiritum Sanctum, sanctam ecclesiam, remissionem peccatorum, carnis resurrectionem,*

<sup>143</sup> His anti-Manichaean work *The Nature of Good* deals with these issues more fully.

short, intention is important in these situations: deliberate lying is always a sin (18), however accidental error is not a sin (20), but still an evil (19).

In this discussion it is difficult to find Augustine's scriptural basis. There is a desire that his argument be consistent with Scripture, however Scripture seldom has a place in the formation of his original argument.

When discussing this first section of the Creed, Augustine uses Scripture in three different ways, none of which are foundational. First of all he uses Isaiah 5:20 as an aside to caution against calling evil good and good evil. Secondly he raises the problem text of Matthew 7:18 ("A good tree cannot bear bad fruit"). This presents the problem of how a good world can produce any sin at all. And finally Hebrews 2:4 ("the righteous live by faith") shows that even an ignorant Christian can be righteous, because he lives by faith even through his ignorance.

The lack of a scriptural foundation is most obvious in his argument that the source of all things is God's goodness and evil is the defect of good. In this opening section Scripture is not quoted or referenced once. This suggests that it does not have the determining role we might expect, and moreover in a Christian handbook Augustine does not deem it necessary to substantiate these claims with Scripture to his readers.

The reason for this lack of scriptural quotations is the philosophical as well as ecclesiastical authority of the argument. Philosophically Augustine finds his position, regarding one all powerful source of good, compelling. The Neoplatonism of his youth has remained a heavy influence. This position is seen in the *summum bonum* in

the *On Christian Teaching*. His stance is formed philosophically, not scripturally. Augustine has warrant for this because there are no plain Scriptures to direct him. Scriptural consistency is important as we see in his reference to problem texts, but he lacks these texts at a formative level. Augustine has a greater goal for his philosophical position. It allows him to systematise good and evil in Scripture, which ultimately enhances his understanding of the Christian life. An example of this can be seen at the end of his section on God as the Creator when he discusses when error is a sin. Having set in place the roles of good and evil, he is able to say that error is always an evil, but only a sin when deliberate. So his conclusion is that Christians should always speak the truth (22). In summarising this discussion he says,

We must know the causes of good and evil insofar as is necessary to enable us to travel along the road that leads us to the kingdom where there will be life without death, truth without error, happiness without anxiety (23)

This is not just a philosophical point, but he means it to be useful for the Christian life.

There is also assumed ecclesiastical authority for Augustine's position, which further explains the lack of Scripture references. This authority, which is applicable to all his discussion of faith, comes from the fact that Augustine is using the Creed as a skeleton for his discussion. He assumes that he is articulating true Catholic doctrine and therefore has the weight of the Church behind him: the Church believes that God is the Creator and this means he is the source of all good, and evil must be the defect of this good.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Of course these Creedal statements have been constructed from Scripture and therefore in some sense Augustine does have Scripture at a formative point, however this is never explicit.

*b. The Role and Person of Christ (23-55)*

The largest part of the Milanese Creed regards the person and role of Christ. It states:

And in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified and was buried, ascended into heaven, sits at the right hand of the Father, whence he will come to judge the living and the dead.

Having ended the previous section with human error and sin, Augustine continues to show how humanity has fallen and polluted the good. This provides the link to the new topic of the role of Christ as redeemer and his personhood. Indeed, the first eleven chapters (23-33) of this section refer to the redeeming work of Christ, reflecting the impetus of this section of the Creed, to show how sinful humanity is dealt with. The discussion of this section of the Creed itself can be separated as follows: born of the virgin Mary (34-36); born of the Holy Spirit (37-38); the sonship of Christ (39); suffered and crucified and its effects (40-47); mediator with the Father (48-53); and the Judge of the living and the dead (54).

As Augustine's discussion continues, he begins to freely quote Scripture, and particularly Romans, when discussing salvation by grace and the rebirth that comes through Christ (50-52). Interestingly, this frequent use of Scripture comes at the points where the Creed is not explicit. Conversely, when the Creed is explicit, say about the virgin birth, Augustine does not quote so readily.<sup>145</sup> Indeed when discussing

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<sup>145</sup> There are Scripture references in his discussion of the Holy Spirit and Christ as the judge of the living and the dead, but these do not have the formative role in his argumentation as, for example his discussion on salvation by grace.

salvation by grace, we have a model example of Augustine's close reading of Scripture spanning the whole Canon.

There are two likely reasons why Augustine changes from few quotations to frequent quotations. First is the issue of ecclesiastical authority. Augustine does not feel the same need to refer to Scripture because the Church's authority is enough. In the *Enchiridion* this can be seen at a point when the Church's authority on a matter eliminates certain conclusions. When Augustine discusses the virginity of Mary, he affirms the historical doctrine of *virginitas in partu*, that her physical body was unchanged by the birth of Christ. His defence of this is simply that otherwise she would not be a virgin when Christ was born and would break Church doctrine.

But if her virginity were impaired by his birth he would not then be born of a virgin, and the whole Church would be wrong – which God forbid – in acknowledging him as born of the virgin Mary. (35)

The second reason that Augustine does not quote Scripture as much when referring to the Creed is because the Creed articulates doctrine in a simple and concise way that Scripture does not. That is, the statements of the Creed combine broad scriptural evidence and systematic theology, and it is unlikely that there is a text that can provide this same function. Augustine uses the Creed as a heuristic aid to Christian teaching. He takes the Creed as authoritative, but this does not mean that he does not recognise the biblical background to the Creed.<sup>146</sup>

c. The place of the Church (56-64)

<sup>146</sup> This lends itself to the question of whether the Creeds authority comes from Scripture or from the affirmation of the Church, but these issues are not raised in the *Enchiridion*.

The third section in the *Enchiridion* regards the creedal phrase “in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Church.” This is the shortest of Augustine’s five sections. Augustine explains the reason that the Creed has this section as the final part of the Trinity and Church that follows it.

When we have said about Jesus the only Son of God, our Lord, what is appropriate in a brief confession of faith, we add, as you know, that we believe in the Holy Spirit, to complete the Trinity. Then we mention Holy Church, whence we may understand that the rational part of creation which belongs to the free city of Jerusalem must be mentioned after the creator, that is the supreme Trinity. (56)

In fact he says that the Church should be named after the Trinity “like a house after the one who lives in it, a temple after its god and a city after its founder.” Augustine deals with the Spirit and the Church to make the point that as the Church we are indwelt by the Spirit.

Again the absence of Scripture references it is noticeable. He explains how the Creed shows the divinity of the Spirit rather than how this is seen in Scripture.

So the Holy Spirit, if were a creature not creator, would certainly be a rational creature...*so would not be placed before the Church in the rule of faith*, since he also would be a member of the Church...and would have no temple but be himself a temple. (56, my emphasis)

This suggests that the Rule of Faith, or the Creed, is both an accurate articulation of faith, as well as authoritative for understanding faith. Augustine proceeds to quote Scripture to show how Christians are temples for the Spirit. This helps to draw the link between the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and the Church itself becoming holy.

The role of Scripture in this section is instructive for living a holy and peaceful life. Augustine sees no need to explain where the doctrine of the Church comes from, and indeed when referring to the divinity of the Spirit does not explain how Scripture informs this doctrine. This again suggests the ecclesiastical authority of the Creed when explaining the foundations of the Christian faith.

For three chapters Augustine goes off on a tangent to discuss the heavenly Church of angels. At this point he looks to 2 Peter 2:4 regarding the angels sent to hell, and the role of angels in Hebrews 1:13, Psalm 148:2 and Colossians 1:16. However this tangent does not appear important to Augustine, and his quotation of Scripture reflects this. He concludes, “I confess that I am ignorant of these things” (58). We see how Augustine views Scripture as good for resolving complex issues, but for key doctrines ecclesiastical statements are a sufficient authority.

#### *d. Forgiveness of sins (65-83)*

Forgiveness of sins is the fourth major section and follows on from the Church because it is on forgiveness of sins “that the Church on earth stands, because of this that what was lost is found and does not perish” (64). Augustine discusses the importance of forgiveness of sins before moving to the role of almsgiving and then types of sins. In line with the other sections he does not support this doctrine with evidence from Scripture, but holds secondary issues up to the light of Scripture. For example, when he raises the opinion of some who believe that a person who is baptised and not cut off from the Church by heresy, even if he continues in

unrepentant sin, will still go to heaven, he concludes that “when we consult holy scripture, it give us a different reply” (67).

The rest of this section continues by providing a biblical examination of several topics relating to the forgiveness of sins. Some of these biblical topics include: faith and good works according to James (67); being saved by fire (68; 1 Cor. 3:12); the role of the Lord’s Prayer in daily forgiveness (71); loving your enemies (73, 76); forgiving others (74; Matt. 6:14-15); what is true almsgiving according to Luke 11:41 (75-76); the degrees of seriousness of sin according to 1 Corinthians 6-7 (79); what the Bible says about habitual sin and weakness and ignorance causing sin (80-81); and finally sinning against the Spirit (83; Eph. 4:30). This whole section is a biblical exploration of the topics surrounding the forgiveness of sins. At some points he takes special care to understand one particular text, like Luke 11:41 or 1 Corinthians 6-7, and at other points includes what he considers key Christian texts such as the Lord’s Prayer and loving your neighbour as yourself (Luke 10:27).

It is also worth noting the authority of the Church in forgiveness of sins. The Church is the means through which sins are forgiven.

Anyone who does not believe that sins are forgiven in the Church, with contempt for this great and generous divine gift, and ends his last day obstinate in his opinion, is guilty of the unforgivable sin against the Holy Spirit, in whom Christ forgives sins. (83)

This section perhaps gives us the best understanding of how Augustine understood the hierarchy of truths in the Creed where the core issues are of first authority and secondary issues are to be resolved by exegesis. We see the Church’s authority to

articulate doctrine, to forgive sins, and also as a biblical authority to decipher the truth about secondary issues.

*e. The Resurrection of the flesh (84-113)*

The final phrase of the Creed is the belief in the ‘resurrection of the flesh.’ The first half of this section involves Augustine asking very carnal questions about what the resurrection of the flesh will be like. He raises the question of what will happen to aborted foetuses (85), whether physical deformities will be carried into the next life (85) and how else resurrected bodies will relate to their earthly bodies (87), even raising the problem of receiving back the hair that has been cut in a human’s life (89). The second half raises more general post-death questions such as the resurrection of the lost (92), God’s divine will for the lost (94-95), grace differentiating between the lost and the saved (98-99), the problem text of 1 Timothy 2:4 (103), what happens between death and the resurrection (103), and hell which awaits the unbeliever (112-113).

There is an interesting insight into Augustine’s view of some of the Church practices regarding the dead. This is seen in an early form of purgatory that he suggests. He already made a passing reference by using the Latin *purgatorium* when discussing the post-mortem purifying fire that saves some of the faithful (69). In this section he mentions the practice of praying for the dead.

Nor should it be denied that the souls of the dead are supported by the piety of their loved ones who are alive, when the sacrifice of the mediator is offered for them or alms are given in the Church. (110)

He does not question this particular ecclesiastical practice, but does temper it with Scripture by quoting 2 Corinthians 5:10.

For all of us must appear before the judgement seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or bad.

(110)

This passage cautions the reader, “nobody should hope to gain in the sight of the Lord after death what he has neglected here” (110). Scripture informs and tempers an already established ecclesiastical practice, but does not question the root of it. This reflects the wider principle that Augustine accepts the main practices and doctrines of the Church and then allows Scripture to inform and further define these practices and doctrines.

It is clear that Augustine accepts all these Creedal statements without question because at the core they are founded on biblical ideas. His hermeneutic regarding the Creed is one of accepting the systematised articulation of faith by the Church as authoritative and from this point he uses Scripture to identify how these statements should be understood. The Creedal statements form guiding principles that lead him around the main theological cornerstones of the Christian faith.

## **5. The Creed, Hope and Scripture**

Faith is the substance of Christianity and hope is one of its fruits. Augustine has explained what this faith is in accordance with the Creed and now moves on to hope (114-116).

From this confession of the faith, which is contained in short compass in the creed and is like milk for infants when considered according to the faith, but is

like food for the strong when spiritually meditated and reflected on, arises the good hope of the faithful which is accompanied by holy charity. (114).

As we have seen above this is not only the natural product of faith, but it also is the biblical product of faith as indicated by 1 Corinthians 13:13.

Augustine begins with the Lord's Prayer in the Gospel of Matthew and then continues to compare it to the version in the Gospel of Luke. As we have seen, this is an example of how Augustine uses one text to enlighten another. The seven petitions of Luke's Gospel clarify the five petitions of Matthew's Gospel. His discussion of hope is small considering the length of Augustine's section on faith. The section on faith is roughly forty times the size of his small section on hope. Part of the reason for this, he explains, is that the only things to be believed regarding hope are contained in the Lord's Prayer, whereas faith covers a much wider spectrum (114). Prayer is one of the things that connect faith, hope and love, but it is most central with regard to hope. With respect to hope Augustine is more concerned about what is to be done and hoped for (i.e. prayer) rather than what is to be believed – and what is to be believed is the fundamental function of the handbook.

The product of believing the Creed can be summarised in the Lord's Prayer. In this way, the Creed has become a hermeneutic to interpret this prayer. As we believe in this true faith articulated in the Creed, we are led to hope for what is shown in the Lord's Prayer. Each of the petitions demonstrates how the Creed can be actualised in the present. We have already seen this briefly with forgiveness (71).

Who cannot see that these petitions concern our needs in the present life? So that eternal life in which we hope to be for ever hallowing of God's name, his

kingdom and his will will endure perfectly and immortally in our spirit and body. (115)

It is these attributes that begin in the Christian and are perfected as time goes on. This is in keeping with Augustine's view of the Christian path as a journey towards loving God and others perfectly, so it is with learning true hope.

The result is that the Lord's Prayer is not instructive for the Christian as much as a goal for his life – this is the Christian hope. The Creed has interpreted the prayer and so it continues to guide Augustine not only in matters of belief, but also in matters of hope. Here we see how the Creed takes a further role than just systematising the doctrines of the Church, but it should also lead to the desires of the Christian heart. It there shows how the Creed goes beyond an articulation of Christian doctrine.

## **6. The Creed, Love and Scripture**

Augustine's concluding remarks centre on love; an important topic to him (117-121). Only a little longer than his chapters on hope, it provides a profound and moving doxological finish to the work, bringing all that has been said into the framework of love. It is a warning against anyone reading this handbook dogmatically, without seeing the most important of all things – love. Ramsey comments that,

The few pages that Augustine devotes to love are, in their way, more sweeping than the many that he gives over to faith.<sup>147</sup>

Of course this fits into Augustine's lifelong thinking that the love of God and neighbour should be the governing principle in the Christian's life. He comments that "the greater it is in a person, the better is that person in whom it is" (117). Indeed

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<sup>147</sup> Ramsey, 25.

even if someone believes and hopes correctly, it will be in vain if it does not lead to love.

In a similar way to hope, Augustine uses the Creed as a hermeneutic to direct his reading on living in love. Of course love is also another hermeneutic as we have seen in *On Christian Teaching*. This can particularly be seen in his use of the phrase ‘faith in Christ...which works through love’ (117). That is to say, how are we to love? We are to love through faith in Christ, which is articulated in the Creed. In this way the Creed becomes a hermeneutical guide for understanding love. He continues the link with prayer by saying that through prayer faith satisfies the law, “For faith obtains by prayer what the law commands” (117). The Spirit pours love into the Christian’s heart that he might put his faith into action.

Although the Creed or the Rule of Faith is not referred to in this section, Augustine uses the language of ‘commandments’ as that which is dead without love. These commandments should be understood in relation to faith according to the Creed because for Augustine the commandments and faith have the same aim which is to justify the person, but one will serve only to highlight the person’s sin, whilst the other will bring salvation. Therefore, just as the end of the commandment is love, so the end of the confession is love. Augustine quotes 1 Timothy 1:5 to refer to faith in the Creed.

The end of the commandment is charity that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and sincere faith. (121)

Augustine has used the process where faith leads to hope and love to help him demonstrate how love should be the goal of faith. In this way 1 Corinthians 13:13 is the hermeneutic which opens the door to understand such texts as 1 Timothy 1:5.

It adds a new perspective to the command to love when put in the context of the Creed. To arrive at a proper sense of love the Christian must first accept the faith. The Creed is an essential stepping-stone towards the great goal of love.

### **Conclusion**

The *Enchiridion* provides an example of how Augustine accepts the authority of the Church's articulation of the faith. Starting with the biblical triad of faith, hope and love, he explains how this faith is demonstrated in the Creed. This faith leads to hope and finally love. Hermeneutically we are taken through several different steps: from the biblical triad, to the Church's articulation, and the final product of hope and love. The Creed becomes a hermeneutic in itself to understand what hope and love are. Augustine accepts this Creed unreservedly and Scripture helps to further define the secondary issues of these creedal statements. All this points to how Augustine sees the Church's authority and Scriptural authority as interrelated.

## Final Conclusions

The four texts we have examined all shed a different light on the hermeneutical principles and boundaries that Augustine abides by in his writing. In conclusion, we will attempt to draw these principles and boundaries together into a more concise account of Augustine's hermeneutics. We will also trace the development of Augustine's hermeneutics throughout the four texts. The four texts span his whole time as Bishop of Hippo, the last thirty years of his life.

### 1. Hermeneutical Rules and Principles

The basic rules for interpretation that Augustine employs can be summarised as follows. In all his writing he shows a high sensitivity to the wider canon. In some instances, this can be seen when he allows one biblical passage to interpret another. This is most obvious in *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, where we see Augustine drawing from several different parts of Scripture, particularly the Psalms and Pauline literature, to assist in his interpretation of Genesis 1-3. He shows that regardless of the different genre or historical context of scriptural passages, they are able to shed light on one another. Sensitivity to the wider canon is also demonstrated in the problem texts that are raised. To either defend an argument against potential criticisms or develop an argument Augustine will often raise texts that appear to contradict his argument. These texts are usually taken from a different biblical passage and often resolved through another biblical passage. An example of this is in the *Enchiridion* where we identified the combination of complex and problem texts to deal with potential problems.

Another rule that reflects this sensitivity to the wider canon is allowing clearer texts to illuminate less clear texts. This reflects the important hermeneutical principle of the theological unity of Scripture. In his examination of the Heptateuch, *Quaestiones in Heptateuchum*, he comments that the Old Testament lies in the New Testament and the New Testament lies in the Old Testament (II, 73).<sup>148</sup> That does not mean that Augustine does not appreciate the different lines of thought and historical context of each of the scriptural texts, but there is a unity amongst the diversity. A contemporary example of this hermeneutic is in Marcus Bockmuehl's recent publication *Seeing the Word*. He uses the expression "coherent diversity" to describe how the New Testament authors gathered around one unifying theme, regardless of their different historical contexts.<sup>149</sup> Later he adds,

[T]here is little question that both the authors and framers of the canon *intended and expected* the individual texts and the collections to be understood in this fashion.<sup>150</sup>

In a similar way Augustine assumed theological unity in his hermeneutics whilst acknowledging the different biblical account.

A second hermeneutical rule is that Augustine uses a combination of literal and figurative interpretation. At the time when many of his exegetical peers, such as Origen, Ambrose and Gregory the Great, preferred allegorical and figurative interpretations, Augustine adopted a wider range of interpretive tools. In seeking the literal meaning, or the plain sense of the text, he distances himself from the

<sup>148</sup> As referenced and translated by Eugène Portalié, *A Guide to the Thought of St Augustine*, 124.

<sup>149</sup> Bockmuehl, *Seeing the Word*, 108.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.* 113, Bockmuehl's emphasis.

superstitious reading of Scripture that was common in North Africa at the time.<sup>151</sup>

The plain reading of Scripture involves looking to authorial intent (particularly in the Pauline literature), the historical setting, and the literary genre of the text. In *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* he examines not only the meaning of the text, but also the historical event surrounding the text.

However, Augustine also accepts the legitimacy of figurative interpretation.<sup>152</sup> This is demonstrated in *On the Spirit and the Letter* where he acknowledges an allegorical interpretation as valid. Moreover in *On Christian Teaching* he advises his readers to interpret allegorically any text that is obscure in its plain sense. So the allegorical interpretation becomes the secondary interpretation, which is resorted to if the literal sense will not suffice. This is an important point about how Augustine has a process when interpreting Scripture. At other times Augustine appears to use the allegorical method to unlock the hidden depth of Scripture. However the driving force behind this is not a conviction about the allegorical method, but the infinite depth of Scripture and its usefulness for teaching both the wise and simple. Indeed this reflects Augustine's attempt to offer the Bible as an intellectually challenging book to his readers.<sup>153</sup> The hermeneutical principle behind this is that the primary meaning of Scripture is to be found in its plainest reading, but for those looking to be

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<sup>151</sup> See Teske, "Introduction" in *On Genesis*, 12.

<sup>152</sup> Some scholars do not accept that Augustine has any real desire to accept a literal interpretation. For example Richard Norris refers to Augustine's "addiction" to the spiritual or figurative sense to defend the unifying theme of Scripture ("Augustine and the Close of the Ancient Period of Interpretation", 97). This appears unduly critical of Augustine's interpretation and attempt to allow Scripture to speak within the confines of the Rule of Faith and Charity.

intellectually challenged by Scripture, it has infinite depth. The allegorical interpretation is also linked to the unity of Scripture. Augustine allows the wider canon to guide his allegorical interpretation. Agaësse and Solignac express Augustine's allegorical and metaphorical interpretation of Scripture by simply allowing the New Testament to interpret the Old Testament.<sup>154</sup> In this way the unity of Scripture and the allegorical interpretation are closely tied together.

In general, Augustine's interpretative rules can be summarised the following list:

- i) The first hermeneutical principle is that in the proper order of interpretation the literal sense should be sought first. Beyond this point the figurative sense may be sought.
- ii) The literal sense is the most obvious and self-evident meaning of Scripture unless this meaning is absurd or contradicts the authority of Scripture. These observations serve Augustine's high view of Scripture.
- iii) If an interpretation is absurd and/or contradicts the authority of Scripture, a figurative interpretation should be found.
- iv) The historical events narrated in Scripture will often reflect a deeper symbolic meaning.

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<sup>153</sup> When it comes to the Old Testament Augustine suggests that "nearly all" of it should be interpreted both literally and figuratively (*On Christian Teaching*, 3.73). This may reflect when he first heard of the Old Testament interpreted figuratively by Ambrose.

<sup>154</sup> Cf. The introduction in P. Agaësse and A. Solignac's translation of *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, *La Genèse au sens littéral*, in *Oeuvres De Saint Augustin*, Bibliothèque Augustinienne, 48.38, as is noted in Roland Teske, *Saint Augustine: On Genesis*, 28-29.

- v) The first question to ask of any biblical text is what genre it is. This will allow the reader to have certain expectations about how much literal or figurative meaning it contains.
- vi) Every word is inspired and therefore the text should be finely examined, word-by-word, for meaning.
- vii) The meaning of the text will not given in one passage, but the whole of the biblical material should be studied on any particular issue.
- viii) The text has been accommodated for the sake of the human readers and this should humble the exegete lest he thinks that he can rule the text.
- ix) The literal sense should go beyond the historical or textual to the theological meaning of the text.
- x) Scripture is for the nourishment of the Christian and this must be upheld in any interpretation.
- xi) Finally, secular thought can be helpful in advancing the constructive interpretation of Scripture, but may also be dangerous in leading Christians to stop leading on Scripture to lean on science instead.

## **2. Hermeneutical Boundaries**

In addition to the rules and principles that Augustine adopts to interpret Scripture the text has a set of hermeneutical boundaries.

The first and most important boundary is the Rule of Charity: Every interpretation must advance the love of God and the love of neighbour. Although this is most explicit in *On Christian Teaching* it can be seen in all four works. In what is the most telling statement about Augustine's hermeneutics, he says,

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. (*On Christian Teaching*, 1.86)

Every other principle and boundary can be found within this Rule of Charity. It reflects love for the *summum bonum*, which as a goal cannot be surpassed. Indeed it fits with the rest of his theology, which is driven by the idea of the love of God and love of neighbour.<sup>155</sup> This affects Augustine's hermeneutics in that he is unwilling to involve himself in speculative discussions, though such speculative interpretations would have been prevalent in Augustine's interpretation context.

A natural progression from the Rule of Charity is to view Scripture as primarily a theological text. It should not be read simply as history, philosophy or even an anti-intellectual biblicism. But it is a text that directs the Christian in his Christian life and to the infinite depth of the Divine. For example Augustine uses science and the arts as a way to further his understanding Scripture, and not *vice versa*. In *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* he uses arithmetic to understand six as the perfect number and the reason God made his perfect world in six days (4.2.2). This example flies in the face of the Christians in North Africa, who would disdain secular thought. Augustine presents a more balanced picture of using the good from secular thought.

The second boundary that Augustine sets is the Rule of Faith. The Rule of Faith is categorised in different ways in each of the four works we have examined, but they all equate to not allowing an interpretation outwith the orthodox Christian faith. In the

<sup>155</sup> For a further discussion of this see John Burnaby, *Amor Dei: A Study of St.*

*Augustine's Teaching on the Love of God as the Motive of Life.*

*Enchiridion* Augustine is quite specific when he refers to the faith as the Creed. We have noted that when referring to the Creed Augustine appears to mean the Milanese Creed, but does not rigidly keep to it. There is a sense that the Creed could be one of several acceptable Creeds. In the *Enchiridion* it is established alongside Scripture as an expression behind what it is to believe. In this way it is a definition of faith, which should be accepted and used as a boundary in all things. In *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* the Rule of Faith is more broadly referred to “as the faith as handed down by St. Paul” (10.7.12) or “as the Church has recognized” (5.5.15). However it cannot be doubted that he understands this as faith articulated in the church Creeds. In *On Christian Teaching* Augustine presents the Church’s opinion as important when deciding controversial issues. For example he suggests that at a point of uncertainty the reader should “follow the authority of as many catholic churches as possible” (2.24). The authority of several churches can also be incorporated into his definition of the Rule of Faith.

### **3. Development of Augustine’s Hermeneutics**

Through Augustine’s later writing there is a development in his theology, and therefore inevitably his hermeneutics, over the span of his life.<sup>156</sup> His early education in Manicheism is opposed vigorously, whilst his Neo-Platonic education is developed

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<sup>156</sup> Augustine’s doctrine of grace is perhaps the most obvious development in his later life. See Burns, *The Development of Augustine’s Doctrine of Operative Grace*.

within a Christian framework. In this respect the early Augustine differs significantly from the later Augustine.<sup>157</sup>

The development of his hermeneutics is no different. Of the four texts we have examined, *On Christian Teaching* was the first to be started. Books 1.1-3.78 were written around 396/397, whilst the rest were written around 426. As was discussed, there is difficulty in keeping the first section and the later section strictly apart due to Augustine revising and correcting the first section when he came to finish the work.

In 393, two years after arriving in North Africa Augustine began his first attempt at a commentary on Genesis (*On the Literal Meaning of Genesis: An Unfinished Book*). He found the task of interpretation difficult, and in his *Retractions* comments,

But in explaining the Scriptures, my inexperience collapsed under the weight of so heavy a load and, before I had finished one book, I rested from this labor which I could not endure. (*Ret.* I.17)<sup>158</sup>

Having confronted his inexperience in 393, it is only three years later that Augustine begins writing his handbook of interpretation, *On Christian Teaching*. In this respect it is not surprising that he breaks off writing for thirty years. We notice in *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* that Augustine is clearer in his interpretation and feels he is now experienced enough to attempt another interpretation of the first three chapters of Genesis. There is a development in his definition of the 'literal sense'. As Teske has shown, in his first attempt of providing a literal meaning in 393 his goal is to interpret

<sup>157</sup> A look at the *Retractions* will prove how much Augustine wishes to refine some of his views at the end of his life.

<sup>158</sup> Translation of Sister Mary Inez Bogan, quoted in Teske, "Introduction" in *On Genesis*, 42.

“just as the letter sounds” (*On the Literal Meaning of Genesis: An Unfinished Book* 2.2.3).<sup>159</sup> His later commentary has a more complex definition of the literal sense, which includes an appreciation of the theology and deeper symbolism behind the text. This point can also be demonstrated when we look at Augustine’s definition of the literal sense in the section of *On Christian Teaching* written in 396/397. In this section he is clearer on the theory of interpretation, but lacks the maturity of experience. At this early stage, Augustine says that plain texts should be interpreted literally and obscure texts should be interpreted figuratively. In the first section of *On Christian Teaching* (probably written in 397) he simply says,

...anything in the divine discourse that cannot be related to either good morals or to the true faith should be taken as figurative. (3.33)

The simplicity of this statement is common for Augustine in *On Christian Teaching*. However when providing a literal interpretation of Genesis 1-3 in *On the Literal Meaning of Genesis*, written between 401 and 415, his definition of ‘literal’ has a more metaphysical tone that incorporates the spiritual and theological. This development can be accounted for by his growing experience in interpretation that shows that the lines between literal and figurative are not as solid as he once thought. It also demonstrates that his theory of interpretation is developed in practice. The apologetic concerns of *On the Literal Meaning of Genesis* demonstrate how he views the literal interpretation as important in defending the integrity and coherence of Scripture. This would also account for Augustine broadening his definition of the literal interpretation to assist his apologetic.

Another noticeable development is the clearer presentation of a Christian’s theological and spiritual objectives. In his first book of *On Christian Teaching* there

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<sup>159</sup> See *ibid.* 17.

is an *a priori* argument about the *summum bonum* that is then developed into an interpretive technique. However in *On the Spirit and the Letter* and the *Enchiridion* there is simplicity in the presentation of Paul's definition of grace and the Church's definition of faith, respectively. Both works have sections about love. *On the Spirit and the Letter* refers to the work of the Holy Spirit as the one who creates "the delight and the love of that highest and unchangeable good which is God" (5). The *Enchiridion's* concluding section is about love because the "one who rightly loves without doubt rightly believes and hopes" (117). So the importance of love is still a continuous theme, but is presented within the context of grace and faith. As Augustine becomes more knowledgeable of his North African audience and their simpler faith, the presentation of his theology and interpretation become simpler. Peter Brown documents the affect of his move to Hippo and how it changed the elitism of his contemplative life in Milan:

More tender changes had taken place in Augustine. Love and friendship, for instance, are no longer thought of as exclusively the property of like-minded souls living together as a self-conscious elite.<sup>160</sup>

In his life and his thought he has moved away from the elitism of his life in Milan. Augustine has a new sense of his responsibilities to his rural and anti-intellectual congregation. Brown shows how Augustine would "identify himself passionately with the ideal of authority shown in the letters of Paul to his wayward communities."<sup>161</sup> This new responsibility means that he is at pains to provide a hermeneutic of love that is simple and clear to North African readers. In their interpretation they are to be directed by the love of God. Augustine's interpretation, arguments and presentation

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<sup>160</sup> Brown, *Augustine*, 209.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.* 206.

have become simpler and clearer between *On Christian Teaching* and the *Enchiridion*.

#### **4. Theological Hermeneutic**

A final concluding remark should be made about the theological hermeneutic that can be deduced from Augustine's writing and develops during his later life. There is the distinctive hermeneutic that only those with spiritual eyes are able to interpret the Scriptures fully.<sup>162</sup> This spiritual mind covers the central message of each of the works we have examined. The spiritual mind is the one who reads Scripture to love God more in *On Christian Teaching*; reads in the context of redemption by the grace of Christ in *One the Spirit and the Letter*; accepts the literal interpretation and can see spiritual meaning in both the literal and figurative interpretations in *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*; and reads with the faith as articulated in the Creed in the *Enchiridion*. This spiritual hermeneutic is conveyed and developed in these four works. Of course in Augustine's eyes these are not four individual hermeneutics, but one hermeneutic of the believing mind.

This is the theological hermeneutic that Augustine wants to commend to his readers. It transcends the dualistic immorality and elitism of Manichaeism, the violent forcefulness of the Donatists and the self-justifying efforts of the Pelagians. Each of these groups have misunderstood and misrepresented the central message of Scripture and are therefore unable to properly interpret it.<sup>163</sup> Raymond Canning has in fact

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<sup>162</sup> For a broader discussion of Augustine's idea of spiritual and how it affects his interpretation see Roland Teske "Spiritual and Spiritual Interpretation in Augustine".

<sup>163</sup> A. Solignac concisely comments, "the spiritual exegesis of Scripture is reserved to the spirituals" quoted in Teske, "Introduction" in *On Genesis*, 19 n.42.

argued that Augustine's enthusiasm for the love of God is partly driven by an anti-Pelagian motive because only the Holy Spirit can impart the love of God; it cannot be achieved through human effort.<sup>164</sup>

### **Summary**

In the scope of his later life Augustine has developed a hermeneutic to suit both his audience and his critics. The anti-intellectual and superstitious believers in North Africa required a simple and basic hermeneutic when reading Scripture, a hermeneutic that was spiritual and kept within the boundaries of the creed.<sup>165</sup> He wanted to get away from the superstitious authoritarianism in much of North African interpretation, to an interpretation guided by a spiritual and reasoned mind. Moreover, this kept the believers in his diocese safe within the bounds of the Catholic Church.

Augustine also developed a hermeneutic to respond to the ecclesial situation in the fourth and fifth centuries. His spiritual hermeneutic would guard against the unbiblical attitudes of the Manichaeans, Donatists and Pelagians, encouraging the true love of God to be the measure of any interpretation.

<sup>164</sup> Canning argues that Augustine develops his idea of the love of God in a particular way to combat the Pelagians. Canning points to the most obvious case being in Augustine's 65<sup>th</sup> tract of John's Gospel. The love of God "can be explained by Augustine's preoccupation to offer against the Pelagians the irrefutable example of the highest human perfection which cannot possibly be achieved without the Spirit who is poured into the hearts of human beings." Canning, *The Unity of the Love of God*, 27.

<sup>165</sup> Cf. 5.

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