

## “Augustine’s Hermeneutics in a Modern Context”

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*Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh* (Eccl. 12:12, NRSV). So states the author of Ecclesiastes as he draws his book to a close. Besides serving as a motto for graduate students the world over, this little phrase serves to hint at one of the perennial problems of academia: the question of interpretation. Why is it that much study is so utterly exhausting? Well, it’s not because we are all blessed with effortless comprehension of every text we attempt to read. Much of the existence of an academic discipline is owed to the opposite reality- most people do not understand the key texts of the field and those who think they do walk away with drastically different interpretations and assessments. While this issue of interpretation exists in any and every effort at human communication, it seems especially prevalent in Christian theology where a very particular canon of documents is held not just in great esteem but as being *in some sense* inspired and *in some sense* an authoritative body of texts from which we derive an understanding of the Christian faith, even if exactly what those senses are is sometimes a little tricky to define. Particularly in Protestant circles, where the Reformation motto *sola scriptura* puts an extra emphasis on the Biblical corpus, the discipline of hermeneutics is central to the development of the theology on which the life of the Church is based, as evidenced by the rise of modern hermeneutics from the writings of Protestant theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher. Yet the ancient Church was also involved in these questions. In *De Doctrina Christiana* Augustine lays out a distinctively Christian hermeneutic

for approaching Scripture which has undoubtedly had a lasting impact on the way Christians in the West study and read the Bible. In this paper we will discuss Augustine's hermeneutics in the context of the myriad of debates about authorial intention and the relationship between reader and text in the Modern and Post-Modern age and note the way in which Augustine may offer a solution to this problem.

### **Augustine's Hermeneutic**

Augustine lays out almost immediately some of the most fundamental ideas of hermeneutics: first, that all communication occurs through signs (DDC 1.2) and second, that the problem of hermeneutics arises from an "obscurity" of meaning deriving either from a lack of knowledge about the sign in question or an ambiguity in the sign itself (DDC 2.10). The first of these problems- lack of knowledge about the sign- can be alleviated by a general array of studies, focusing on the language and history of the world from which the text emerged (2.11-18; 2.28). The idea is that by understanding the thought world in which the text was created the reader will have a better understanding of the text itself. In so far as this goes Augustine might seem to be arguing for a hermeneutic not too much different from much of the modern historical-critical method. By attempting to immerse ourselves in the world from which the text was produced- in terms of language, history, philosophy, science, and literature- we gain a better understanding of the text itself.

There is another source of obscurity besides that which emerges from simple ignorance of the world surrounding the text. This is obscurity resulting from signs which are themselves ambiguous (DDC 2.10). This kind of obscurity in meaning will require a great deal more effort in order to achieve understanding, and much of Augustine's work is aimed at exactly that. For

dealing with such difficulties Augustine outlines a three step process (DDC 2.9)- first, we must become familiar with the texts in question by repeatedly reading them and committing them to memory. Second, we must then reflect further on those things in the text which are exceptionally clear. From these we derive “rules of life” and “rules of faith” which can guide our future study. The third step is then to delve into the obscure or ambiguous passages in light of these “rules of life” and “rules of faith” and interpret them in a way that coheres with the more clear passages. Along a similar line, Augustine suggests that the greater context can often shed light on the meaning of more obscure passages (DDC 3.2) both because this context establishes a “rule of faith” and because it establishes the argument in which the more obscure passage takes part. Clearly evident in Augustine’s methodology here is an assumption that interpretation has as its goal some sort of usage- be it for doctrine or practice- and not merely the explication of the text for its own sake.

The fundamental principle to note here is that Augustine is arguing for a hermeneutic that centers on coherence as its chief criterion for evaluating meaning. Proper interpretation starts with forming a general familiarity with the text, then capturing its main ideas in the form of the “rules,” and finally, working toward the more obscure passages. In saying this, Augustine is arguing that the parts can only be understood in light of the whole and thus the best interpretations will be the ones that are the most coherent (DDC 1.37; 3.27-28) in that they make the most sense out of all the details of the text.

In developing a coherent reading of scripture Augustine argues that authorial intention can be a great aid:

For if he takes up rashly a meaning which the author whom he is reading did not intend, he often falls in with other statements which he cannot harmonize with this meaning. And if he admits

that these statements are true and certain, then it follows that the meaning he had put upon the former passage cannot be the true one: and so it comes to pass, one can hardly tell how, that, out of love for his own opinion, he begins to feel more angry with scripture than he is with himself. And if he should once permit that evil to creep in, it will utterly destroy him. (DDC 1.37).

The assumption here seems to be that authors are generally coherent in how they express their thoughts (clearly Augustine had never read Hegel). Thus, the meaning intended by the author will be coherent- all the various parts will harmonize with one another. To propose a reading that does not follow the intention of the author, then, will more often than not result in a reading that is incoherent when we consider the work as a whole. It is important to note, however, that for Augustine the author's intention is not the last word on the meaning of the text but only a possible tool for getting at that meaning. To illustrate we will examine two passages of *De Doctrina Christiana*, the first from book three:

And if a man in searching the Scriptures endeavors to get at the intention of the author through whom the Holy Spirit spoke, whether he succeeds in this endeavor, or whether he draws a different meaning from the words, but one that is not opposed to sound doctrine, he is free from blame so long as he is supported by the testimony of some other passage of Scripture. (DDC 3.27).

Here it seems apparent that for Augustine the final measure of an interpretation is not the author's intention but the coherence of the interpretation with the rest of Scripture. Thus, if the author's intention cannot be found this is not problematic so long as a coherent reading can still be produced. In another passage, this one taken from book one, Augustine lays out a similar idea:

If, on the other hand, a man draws a meaning from them that may be used for the building up of love, even though he does not happen upon the precise meaning which the author whom he reads intended to express in that place, his error is not pernicious, and he is wholly clear from the charge of deception. (DDC 1.36).

The significance of this passage is that it illustrates how the criterion of coherence fits in with another criterion laid out by Augustine which he arguably considers more important- the

building up of love. This will be discussed in greater detail below, but suffice it to say now that this illustrates again that authorial intention is not the highest priority for Augustine's hermeneutic though he does consider it a valuable tool in arriving at the most coherent interpretation.

One of the most interesting and significant consequences of Augustine's emphasis on coherence as chief criterion of good interpretation over and above authorial intention is that it allows for multiple "meanings" to be attributed to a text.

When, again, not some one interpretation, but two or more interpretations are put upon the same words of Scripture, even though the meaning the writer intended remain undiscovered, there is no danger if it can be shown from other passages of Scripture that any of the interpretations put on the words is in harmony with the truth... For what more liberal and more fruitful provision could God have made in regard to the Sacred Scriptures than that the same words might be understood in several senses, all of which are sanctioned by the concurring testimony of other passages equally divine? (DDC 3.27).

For Augustine a plurality of meanings attributed to the text is not problematic so long as the meanings are coherent with the full body of the text and with "the truth," by which he almost certainly means the "rule of Faith" embodied in Church doctrine. Augustine is, in other words, ruling out a "voodoo" hermeneutic<sup>1</sup> which might describe Ecclesiastes as a recipe for spaghetti. However, two interpretations of Song of Songs, one taking the text as an allegory of God's love of the Church and one taking it as promoting proper love between people, might both be considered reasonable interpretations that cohere with the rest of Scripture and with "the truth."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The affectionate name given by David Malick to any hermeneutic which seems to posit that "anything goes" and thus develop interpretations out of thin air, "Class Lectures: Hermeneutics I and II" at Southeastern Bible College, (Birmingham: Fall 2007-Spring 2008). The spaghetti recipe is also taken from Malick's lectures.

<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that this is merely a possible illustration and if it was demonstrated that these particular interpretation do not both meet the criteria of coherence with the text and "the truth" the principle Augustine has argued for would not suffer at all.

## Post-Modern Developments and Augustine's Hermeneutics

Schleiermacher's author-centered method of interpretation will run into a serious problem in the course of modern discourse, this being the problem of subjectivity- we as people always read from our own first person perspective, which makes finding the perspective of the author exceptionally difficult if not outright impossible.<sup>3</sup> While this problem has been dealt with in a variety of ways which attempt to overcome the problems of subjectivity by creating "structured" means of assessing the text which were more "objective" it is generally accepted that the structuralist project has failed and a wide variety of post-structuralist and post-modern understandings of hermeneutics have developed.<sup>4</sup> Increasingly the questions of hermeneutics have focused less on the supposed intention of the author and more on how our own presuppositions impact our readings, how we as readers are able to respond to the text and how that response colors our understanding of the text. From these concerns have developed a variety of reader-response oriented schools of thought as well as Jacques Derrida's school of deconstructionism, with the general impression being that our presuppositions sufficiently impact our readings of the text so as to deny the text any authoritative value either because no agreed upon meaning can exist or because of the oppressive character of our readings.

It is commonplace to assume that this emphasis on our presuppositions is a new, perhaps post-modern, revelation in hermeneutics. However, ancient Christian thinkers were certainly aware of and made use of this principle. Origen, for example, begins his discussion of the interpretation of scripture in *On First Principles* with a discussion of the "rule of faith" with the

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<sup>3</sup> This problem drives the hermeneutics of Dale Martin, for instance. See *Sex and the Single Savior*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 1-16.

<sup>4</sup> In many respects this summary of developments within hermeneutics is indebted to the summary provided by Grant Osborne in Appendices 1 and 2 of *The Hermeneutical Spiral, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*, (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006).

implication that these doctrines (read presuppositions in our contemporary lingo) must guide any interpretation of scripture and that an interpretation which conflicts with said doctrines cannot be considered a valid, Christian interpretation. While Origen's list of necessary Christian presuppositions is quite lengthy and controversial, Augustine posits a much shorter set, arguing that promoting love of God and neighbor must be held as the ultimate goals of scripture and thus any interpretation which does not point towards those ends cannot be considered a valid interpretation (DDC 1.35). For both of these ancient writers the presuppositions we bring to the text are not shackles that need to be shed but guides which aid us in acquiring the proper interpretation so long as they are used correctly.

The almost immediate objection, from a contemporary perspective, might be that the endorsement of presuppositions just leads to the exaltation of our morals as supreme and the oppression of all those who disagree with us. Somewhere Derrida's ears are twitching... Yet this is not exactly lost on Augustine. He is quite aware that different cultures and different eras have very different systems of morality, as is even evident in the difference in moral practices from the Old Testament to the New Testament in Scripture (DDC 3.12-14; 3.17-23). This seems to be perfectly acceptable to Augustine, though it adds a layer of complication to our interpretation of Scripture- we cannot interpret the document as if it followed our morals, we must recognize the morals present in the text itself (DCC 3.14; 3.18). For Augustine it would seem that the presuppositions which guide our interpretation are not so controlling that the only meaning we take away is the meaning we want to read into the text, we can in fact recognize that the text disagrees with us or challenges us in some way.

A prime example of reader-response criticism dealing with the Biblical corpus in the contemporary American academy is Dale Martin, who in many ways is explicitly acting in an

Augustinian tradition of interpretation. Following Augustine, Martin advocates interpretation of Scripture in line “with correct doctrine and the love of God and neighbor.”<sup>5</sup> In particular, Martin spends a great deal of time defending love as a concept which should guide specifically Christian interpretations of Scripture.<sup>6</sup> Like Augustine, Martin wants to avoid any one discipline being the single determining control on interpretation, particularly any sort of historical criticism aimed at determining the intention of the author.<sup>7</sup> In this sense, he seems to be implicitly arguing with Schleiermacher and those who follow him. Yet, again following Augustine, Martin argues that history, “imagined authorial intention,”<sup>8</sup> and other such considerations can be extremely useful for understanding a text so long as they are not considered authoritative.<sup>9</sup>

However, there are some difficult, lingering questions in Martin’s hermeneutics. In particular, Martin seems uncertain about the role of the text in interpretation. He adamantly trumpets his maxim “Texts don’t mean. People mean with texts.”<sup>10</sup> Yet he also seems to want to maintain that the text cannot be taken to say just anything.<sup>11</sup> He suggests that the Augustinian criteria of sound doctrine and love are headed in the right direction for judging interpretations but wants to maintain that they are not “foolproof” to avoid any claim of reinstating “foundationalism” around these criteria.<sup>12</sup>

This seeming open-endedness might be solved by a criterion that lurks through Martin’s writing but never gains the status of explicit statement as such: “ethical interpretation.”<sup>13</sup> The

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<sup>5</sup> Martin, 181.

<sup>6</sup> Martin, 165-69.

<sup>7</sup> Martin, 4-14.

<sup>8</sup> Martin, 8.

<sup>9</sup> Martin, 176-77.

<sup>10</sup> See for instance Martin, 1.

<sup>11</sup> See for instance Martin, 14-16.

<sup>12</sup> Martin 181.

<sup>13</sup> See for instance pp. 16, 169, 181.

obvious question, which may explain why this standard is not proposed explicitly as a criterion for judging interpretations, is whose ethics we are talking about? Throughout Martin's project it seems implicit that *his* ethics are the understood standard by which interpretations are being judged. Yet certainly his ethics are not universally agreed upon. Would a disagreement over his ethics result in an invalidation of his interpretation of a given passage? Martin's safeguard against this is the relativism inherent in reader-response criticism- if the reader is responsible for creating meaning in a text, then Martin's interpretations stand as valid even if there is a significant disagreement over the ethical standards that inform them. Yet the open-endedness of this method seems to obviously become a danger- if the validity of an interpretation rests solely in the authority of the reader then there seem to be no criteria for judging readings, a conclusion Martin adamantly wants to avoid. Ultimately, it seems that Martin wants to have his cake and eat it too, but the tension within his own writing seems to suggest he is uncertain how to go about doing that.

In contrast to Martin, for Augustine the text is "active" in interpretation in at least two ways. First, the text is the object of interpretation, which is to say that we can only interpret what is in the text, allowing the text to act as a limitation on possible interpretations. A recipe for spaghetti cannot be derived from Ecclesiastes for the simple reason that spaghetti is not in the text of Ecclesiastes. Second, through the criterion of coherence, the text acts as judge of interpretations. This means that an interpretation must make sense of everything that is in the text. If an interpretation cannot make sense of a passage, then it is a problematic interpretation. Neither of these roles for the text allow it to speak for itself- the text must still be interpreted, and as we have seen, Augustine certainly believes it is possible to have multiple valid interpretations. His additional criterion of promoting love of God and neighbor further limits meaning, but it

does not dictate interpretation. To a large extent an interpretation will be, for Augustine, the reader's own interpretation. Yet the role the text plays in interpretation for Augustine seems to avoid many of the issues that Martin's hermeneutic struggles with.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

How can we assess Augustine's hermeneutic today? Does Augustine provide a useful, constructive hermeneutic? One of the dangers of hermeneutics post-Schleiermacher has been fundamentalism of one variety or another. The supposed authorial intention, the claimed "one-meaning" of the text has been used more often than not to support dangerously bigoted theology—the claims that the Bible supports slavery or the seemingly endless arguments about the proper reading of the first few chapters of Genesis come to mind almost immediately. Ironically, however, post-modern developments can result in a fundamentalism rooted in the opposite end of the political spectrum. By jettisoning the authority of the text altogether, reader-response approaches to the text make our personal beliefs the source of authority and the text simply a tool in support of our views in a way not at all unlike the methodology of old-school fundamentalism.

Another danger of hermeneutics since Schleiermacher has been to deny that the text has any relevant meaning at all for us today. The text meant one particular thing to its original readers. All other interpretations are invalid. That kind of thinking makes the text almost useless for a culture that is at least 2000 years removed from the original hearers or readers of the Biblical corpus. Such thinking makes studying the text simply an exercise in historical research—what did people think two millennia ago? Interesting discoveries have been made from such research, but how those discoveries connect to the contemporary Christian community is very difficult to negotiate. Likewise, post-modern developments, critiquing the role our

presuppositions have played in the interpretation of the texts, have made interpretation an exercise in sociology. As interesting and as useful as these discoveries also are, how we are to move from the text to a constructive theology in light of these criticisms is still very unclear.

Augustine seems to provide at least a starting place for navigating these murky waters. Augustine incorporates aspects of what we would call the historical-critical method in his hermeneutic, but he also acknowledges the significance of individual presuppositions in interpreting the text and wants to play down the importance of authorial intention as a decisive factor in determining meaning. In doing this, Augustine is fine saying that there are multiple meanings to be taken from the text, provided those meanings are well substantiated. Augustine also wants to preserve the agency of the text, however, in judging interpretations. Finally, Augustine also wants to explicitly note that interpretation has a constructive goal- it aims for the development of doctrine and practice. This doesn't solve the problems of interpretation, by any means. The author of Ecclesiastes may still have the final laugh, but at least Augustine is giving us students a good running start.

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