

30 See Augustine, Sermons 225 and 226; see Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenate*, pp. 313–14.

31 It is important to remember, however, that their journey of conversion would never be fully complete; it would continue as an ongoing process throughout Christian living, as Augustine's reference to the Lord's Prayer as a "daily baptism" signifies.

32 This is the focus of Augustine's sermons 259 and 260. I am indebted to Finn, "It Happened One Saturday Night," p. 594, for this way of phrasing Augustine's concern.

33 Augustine, Sermon 376A.2, cited in Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenate*, p. 332. Note also the following passage from John Chrysostom: "I see many after their baptism living more carelessly than the uninitiated, having nothing particular to distinguish them in their way of life. It is, you see for this cause, that neither in the market nor in the Church is it possible to know quickly who is a believer and who an unbeliever; unless one be present at the time of the mystery, and see the one sort dismissed, the others remaining within – whereas they ought to be distinguished *not by their place, but by their way of life.*" In *S. Matthaei evangelium*, 4.14, cited in Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenate*, p. 74.

34 Augustine, Sermon 259.1–2, cited in Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenate*, p. 334.

35 Finn, "It Happened One Saturday Night," p. 595. For a first-hand description of the effect of the baptismal liturgy on a pilgrim visiting Jerusalem, see *Egeria: Diary of a Pilgrimage*, trans. George E. Gingras (New York: Newman Press, 1970).

Inquiring after God when Meditating on Scripture

Scripture has always been central to Christian theological inquiry. Perhaps as much as 40 percent of the New Testament is scripture interpretation, that is, reinterpretation of what Christians came to regard as the Old Testament. But the Christians were not the first to do this. The Hebrew Bible or Old Testament itself does this. Because the Hebrew Bible was written and edited over the course of many centuries, different books and authors "talk" to one another across the ages, incorporating earlier texts into later ones or rereading some in light of changed circumstances.

Authors of New Testament writings quoted the Greek translation of the Bible that they had and, like their predecessors, reinterpreted it, only now in light of the teaching and death of Jesus that changed their understanding of God, the people of God, the nature of obedience to God, and proper worship of God. The New Testament is the accumulation of that reflection. Subsequently, Christians took both sets of scripture as their own, but interpreted the Hebrew and Aramaic writings of the Jews by means of the Christian principles followed by the Christian interpreters of scripture in the New Testament.

Most of what would eventually be accepted as Christian scripture was written by the end of the first century. And that meant that Christians of the second, third, and fourth centuries who accepted these writings as authoritative read them through the convictions of their faith within the context in which they lived. This process constitutes the development of Christian scriptural interpretation.

Until the seventeenth century it was assumed that the scriptures were from God and given to human beings to disclose "his" truth and goodness and to guide their lives according to God's instruction. But modernity began to challenge these assumptions. Scripture came to be read as historical documents that reveal little

more than the time and place in which they were written and the contended issues of that day. For the past three centuries or more, the Bible has been read like any other literature as well as the revelation of God. Thus, in one sense, biblical scholars have become historians who inquire after the culture or social issues that gave rise to the text rather than theologians who inquire after God.

The interpretive essay in this chapter argues for again taking up theological inquiry as a proper task of biblical interpretation. It contends that the social, historical, and cultural aspects of and issues behind the texts do not exhaust their meaning, for the texts assume that God is real. The biblical documents were written to disclose to readers the God they discuss. To disregard this textual intention is to fail to understand the texts themselves. It carries the concomitant danger of using them for the interpreter's purpose and ignoring the purpose for which they were composed. To fail to take the texts seriously as religious documents is to fail to understand the purpose of reading: to be enlarged, not simply informed.

The chapter undertakes theological meditation both by looking at St. Augustine's interpretation of the First Letter of John, and by listening to the suggestion of one contemporary student of the Bible who seeks to reclaim theological reflection for biblical study. As we have already seen throughout this book, classically, theological reflection occurred in a large variety of genres. Here we have Augustine preaching to his parishioners. There was not then the strict division between first- and second-order reflection that came to be the case in modern theology. But this does not mean that Augustine is not self-conscious about his task as an interpreter of scripture.

While he is eager to draw his listeners' attention to the message that he takes from the well of Johannine literature – that the central Christian teaching is love – he is mindful of the fact that he questions the text, just as modern interpreters do. In the eighth homily he is bothered by a seeming contradiction between the Christian moral norm of love of enemies proclaimed in the Synoptic Gospels, and the seemingly parochial norm of 1 John to love other Christians in the fellowship of the Church. If the central message of the faith is love, and God is love, then God must stretch us beyond our friends into realms that make us uncomfortable.

It could be that Augustine did not grasp that the author of the Epistle was admonishing love of fellow Christians in the context of a deep division in the Church that turned believers against one another, so that the admonition to love one's brother was an admonition to love one's enemy. But it may also be the case that Augustine was quite aware of this fact about the text itself. The problem may not be that Augustine was not bright enough or as informed as a modern biblical historian but that he was calling attention to the issue for another reason.

At the time he wrote these homilies Augustine himself was deeply embroiled in a long and divisive controversy called the Donatist controversy, named after Donatus, the bishop of another North African province of the Church. Donatists upheld a rigorous standard of Christian purity, in which the efficacy of Christian rites depends upon the holiness of the administrator. Augustine opposed the Donatists, arguing

that the sacraments are effective even if administered by unworthy ministers because God, not the local minister, is the one who is at work in the sacraments. As we have seen, Catherine of Siena, along with the whole western church, followed Augustine on this.

On the political side of the matter, Augustine went so far as to admit that civil authority might be used to bring the schismatics back into the Christian fold. This decision led to the practice of religious coercion for many centuries to come. Thus, his admonition to love one's enemies as the Christian moral standard reflects not only his awareness that Church struggles may turn brothers and sisters into opponents, but his own spiritual struggle to love those whom he believed were undermining the integrity of the Catholic faith.

As an artful Christian listener to scripture Augustine was drawing out a feature of the text that spoke both to himself and his audience about what God requires of them. It also enabled genuine reflection on the variety of teachings offered by the various authors. Augustine did not have to choose between critical study of scripture and pastoral nurture. He deftly did both at once.

Professor C. Clifton Black apprentices himself to Augustine to be taught of his deftness, to learn how to do theological exegesis that inquires after God through scripture, since modern scholarship often focuses exclusively on historical questions. Black identifies how Augustine goes about his task and discerns that the master is able to "see" three different concerns simultaneously: the text at hand, its place within the larger scope of scripture, and his audience. Augustine's exegetical task is to bring each point of this triangle into conversation with each other point. With that method in hand, Black points to the message the master delivers about his central concern: the Christian teaching on love. The ability to live lovingly divides faithful from unfaithful Christians. Yet, as we saw with Anselm's treatise on God and Aelred's teaching on spiritual friendship, the ability to live lovingly is so difficult that it must be a gift of the Holy Spirit. The Christian task is to be obedient to God's law of love instead of following one's natural inclinations. This gift is honed in worship in the company of other Christians, even though practicing it extends well beyond the church's walls.

Black concludes that Augustine's contribution to biblical scholarship is to aid the listener in conforming his or her own will with God's by arousing one's love for God. But scripture meditation also leads the seeker to know God who is love. Finally, then, properly done, scripture teaches how to love: as God loves.

SACRED TEXT

1 John

[2:18–25] Children, it is the last hour! As you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. From this we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they did not belong to us; for if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us. But by going out they made it plain that none of them belongs to us. But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and all of you have knowledge. I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and you know that no lie comes from the truth. Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son. No one who denies the Son has the Father; everyone who confesses the Son has the Father also. Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you will abide in the Son and in the Father. And this is what he has promised us, eternal life.

[4:1–21] Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. And this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming; and now it is already in the world. Little children, you are from God, and have conquered them; for the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. They are from the world; therefore what they say is from the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us, and whoever is not from God does not listen to us. From this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love, because he first loved us. Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

CLASSIC TEXT

St. Augustine of Hippo, *Homilies on the First Epistle of John*

Prologue

... [M]y people, . . . [the First Epistle of John] is a book very sweet to every healthy Christian heart that savours the bread of God; and it should be constantly in the mind of God's Holy Church. But I choose [to preach on] it more particularly because what it specially commends to us is charity. The man who has in himself that of which he hears must rejoice at the hearing. To him this reading will be like oil on the flame: if there is matter in him for nourishment, it will be nourished, it will grow and abide. For some, the Epistle should be like flame to firewood; if it was not already burning, the touch of the word may kindle it. In some, then, what is present is to be nourished: in some, what may be lacking is to be kindled; so that we may all rejoice together in one single charity. Where there is charity, there is peace: where there is humility, there is charity. . . .

Seventh Homily (on 1 John 4:4-12)

2. "Now ye are children of God, and ye have overcome him." Overcome, that is, the Antichrist; for he had said above: "Every one that dissolveth Jesus Christ, and denies that he is come in the flesh, is not of God." We have explained, as you remember, that all who violate charity deny Jesus Christ's coming in the flesh, because there was no cause but charity for the coming of Jesus. It is that same charity here enjoined upon us, which he himself enjoins in the Gospel: "Greater love can no man have than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). By no means could the Son of God lay down his life for us, but by clothing himself with the flesh in which he might die. Therefore whoever violates charity, let his tongue say what it will, by his life denies Christ's coming in the flesh; and that man is Antichrist, wherever he is and into whatever place he has made his way. And to them who are citizens of the home-land after which we sigh, John says: "ye have overcome him." How? "Because greater is he that is in you than he that is in this world." He would not have them ascribe the victory to their own strength, and so be overcome by the presumption of pride; for the devil overcomes every man that he makes proud. So, with intent that they may keep humble, John says, first, "ye have overcome him." That word "overcome" might make any man raise his head, hold himself upright, and look for praise. But be not uplifted, see whose is the victory in you: you have overcome, "because greater is he that is in you than he that is in this world." Be humble, carry your Master, go quietly under your rider. It is good for you that he have the reins, and use them. If you have not him on your back, you may throw up your head and heels, but riderless, it will go ill with you: that freedom will dispatch you to the wild beasts as their prey.

3. "They are of the world: therefore speak they of the world, and the world heareth them." They who speak of the world, you must observe, are they who speak against charity. You have heard the Lord's saying: "If ye forgive men their sins, your heavenly Father also will forgive you your sins; but if ye forgive not, neither will your Father forgive you your sins" (Matt. 6:14-15). There is the sentence of truth: deny it, if it be not the Truth who speaks. If you are a Christian and believe the Christ, he said: "I am the truth" (John 14:6): that sentence is true and fast. Now hear the men that speak of the world: "Are you not to have your revenge? Is he to tell the tale of what he has done to you? No, let him feel that he is dealing with a man!" We hear that sort of thing every day, from those who "speak of the world"; and the world hears them. Such things are said only by those who love the world; and only by those who love the world are they listened to.

You have been told that he who loves the world and is regardless of

charity, denies the coming of Jesus in the flesh. What if the Lord himself had so acted in the flesh: if when struck by men's hands, he had been moved to avenge himself; if, hanging on the cross, he had not said: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do"? If he, who had the power, would use no threatenings, why should you, that are subject to another's power, go puffing and blowing? He died because he willed to die, and threatened not: are you to threaten, who know not when your death shall be?

4. "We are of God." Let us see why this is so: whether there is any reason but charity. "We are of God: he that knoweth God, heareth us; he that is not of God, heareth us not. Hereby know we the spirit of truth and of error." Because he that hears us, has the spirit of truth, and he that hears us not, has the spirit of error. Now let us see how he counsels us, and let us hear his counsel as given in the spirit of truth: counsel given not to Antichrists, not to lovers of the world, not to the world. . . . Our attention is roused: he that knows God, hearkens, he that knows not, hearkens not; and here lies the discerning of the spirit of truth and of error. Let us see what is to be the counsel, wherein we should hear him. "Beloved, let us love one another." Why? Because this is a man's counsel? "Because love is of God." It is a strong commendation of love, to say that it is of God; but there is more to come, and let us listen with all our ears. "Love," he has said, "is of God; and everyone that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not, knoweth not God." Why? "For God is love." My brothers, what more could be said? If nothing else were said in praise of love, in all the pages of this Epistle, nothing else whatever in any other page of Scripture, and this were the one and only thing we heard from the voice of God's Spirit — "For God is love" — we should ask for nothing more.

5. See now, that to act contrary to love is to act contrary to God. Let no man say: "When I do not love my brother, I sin against a man;" — note this well — "sin against a man is a small thing, it is only against God I may not sin." How can you not be sinning against God, when you sin against love? "God is love." The words are not mine. If it were I that said, "God is love," any of you might take offence, and say, "What was that? What did he mean, 'God is love'? God has given love, God has granted love." — "Love is of God: 'God is love.' There, my brethren, is God's Scripture before you: this is a canonical Epistle, read in every nation, maintained by universal authority, on which the world itself has been built up. Here you are told by the Spirit of God, "God is love." Now, if you dare, act against God, and refuse to love your brother. . . .

8. . . . When we look at differing actions, we find that charity may cause a man to be fierce, and wickedness to speak smoothly. A boy may be struck by his father, and have fair words from a slave-dealer. Were you to offer a choice between blows and smooth words, who would not choose the fair

words and shun the blows? But if you look to the persons from whom they come, it is charity that strikes and wickedness that ingratiates: You see the point we are making, that the actions of men are discerned only according to their root in charity. Many things can be done that look well, yet do not issue from the root of charity. Thorns too have their flowers. Some actions seem harsh or savage, but are performed for our discipline at the dictate of charity. Thus a short and simple precept is given you once for all: Love, and do what you will. Whether you keep silence, keep silence in love; whether you exclaim, exclaim in love; whether you correct, correct in love; whether you forbear, forbear in love. Let love's root be within you, and from that root nothing but good can spring. . . .

10. "No man hath seen God at any time." God is an invisible reality: he is to be sought, not with the eye, but with the heart. If we would see the light of the sun, we must keep clear the bodily eye which is our means of beholding it. So if we would see God, let us cleanse the eye with which God can be seen. And the place of that eye we may learn from the Gospel: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matt. 5:8). Only let not the "desire of the eyes" fashion our thought of God. One may easily imagine for oneself some vast form, or some measureless immensity extended through space, as it might be this light which our eyes can see, increased to the limit and flooding the landscape; or one may picture some old man of venerable aspect. But our thoughts are not to go that way. There is true matter for your thought, if you would see God. "God is love." What outward appearance, what form, what stature, hands or feet, has love? None can say; and yet love has feet, which take us to the Church, love has hands which give to the poor, love has eyes which give intelligence of him who is in need—as the Psalm says: "Blessed is he who bethinks himself of the needy and the poor" (Ps. 41:1). Love has ears, of which the Lord says: "He that hath ears for hearing, let him hear" (Luke 8:8). All these are not members set each in their own place: he that has charity sees the whole at once with the understanding's grasp. Dwell there, and you shall be dwelt in: abide, and there shall be abiding in you. My brothers, one does not love what one cannot see. Why then, when you hear the praise of charity, are you stirred to acclamation and applause? What have I displayed to your eyes? No vivid colors, no gold or silver, no gems of the treasure-house. My own face has not changed in speaking: this body of mine looks as it did when I entered the church, and so do all of you. You hear the praise of charity, and your voices ring out. Certainly there is nothing for you to see. But let that same delight in charity which makes you acclaim it, lead you to hold it fast in your heart. Listen to me, my brothers: here is a great treasure, which I would urge you with all the power that God gives me to win for yourselves. Suppose you were shown some cup, finely wrought and gilded, which charmed your

eye and compelled your admiration, delighting you by the artist's skill, the weight of the silver and the gleam of the metal. Any of you might exclaim: "If only that cup were mine!" The words would be wasted, for you could not make them come true. Or if one were bent upon possessing it, he might meditate the stealing of it out of the owner's house. Now you have heard the praise of charity: if it delights you, take it for your own—no need to commit any robbery, no need to think of the purchase price. It is yours for nothing. Take hold of it, clasp it to yourself: no possession can be sweeter. If it be such to the hearing of it, what must it be in the owning! . . .

Eighth Homily (on 1 John 4:12-16)

4. It may have occurred to some of you, since we have been expounding this Epistle of John, to ask why the charity which he so strongly commends is only brotherly love. He speaks of "him that loveth his brother," and of the "commandment given to us that we love one another." Brotherly charity is continually spoken of; but of the charity of God, the charity (that is) whereby we love God, there is not such constant mention—though it is not altogether passed over in silence. On the other hand, there is scarcely a word in the whole Epistle about the love of enemies. In all his urgent preaching and commendation of charity, he does not tell us to love our enemies, only to love our brethren. Yet, just now, in our reading of the Gospel, we heard the text: "If ye love them that love you, what reward have you? Do not the publicans the same?" (Matt. 5:46). How is it then that John the Apostle enjoins brotherly love upon us as the great means toward our perfecting, while our Lord says that it is not enough for us to love our brothers, but that love itself must stretch so far as to reach our enemies? The reaching to enemies does not mean the passing over of brothers. . . . Love for those who are linked to you is much the same as love for yourself. Extend it to such as you do not know, who yet have done no harm to you; and now go further than them, and reach to the love of enemies. That, certainly, is our Lord's command. Why then has John said nothing of loving an enemy?

5. All love, even the love we call carnal . . ., my dear brothers, implies necessarily an element of goodwill towards those who are loved. . . . we should not, indeed we cannot love men in the sense in which a glutton will say, "I love partridges": the object of his love being the killing and eating of them. He says he loves, but the effect for the partridges is to put an end to their existence: he loves their destruction. The love of food can only purport its consumption and our own refreshment. Men are not to be loved as things to be consumed, but in the manner of friendship and goodwill, leading us to do things for the benefit of those we love. And if there is nothing

we can do, goodwill alone is enough for the lover. We should not want there to be unfortunates, so that we may exercise works of mercy. You give bread to the hungry; but it would be better that no one should hunger, and that you should not have to give. You clothe the naked; would that all were so clothed so that there were no need for it! You bury the dead: but we long for that life in which there is no dying. You reconcile men at law with one another: but we long for the everlasting peace of Jerusalem where all quarrels are at an end. All these are the services called out by man's needs. Remove distress, and there will be no place for works of mercy. Works of mercy will cease, but there will be no quenching of the fire of charity. You may have the truest love for a happy man, on whom you have nothing to bestow: such love will have a greater sincerity and a far more unspoilt purity. Once you have bestowed gifts on the unfortunate, you may easily yield to the temptation to exalt yourself over him, to assume superiority over the object of your benefaction. He fell into need, and you supplied him: you feel yourself as the giver to be a bigger man than the receiver of the gift. You should want him to be your equal, that both may be subject to the one on whom no favor can be bestowed.

8. The true Christian will never set himself up over other men. God gave you a place above the beasts, in which you are of more value than they. That is your natural privilege, always to be better than a beast. If you would be better than another man, you will grudge to see him as your equal. You ought to wish all men equal to yourself; and if you have gone beyond another man in wisdom, you should want him too to show himself wise. While he is still backward, he may learn of you: while he is ignorant, he has need of you; and you appear as teacher, he as learner. As teacher, you are the superior; as learner, he is the inferior. Unless you want him to be your equal, you will be for having him always as the learner, and that will make you a grudging teacher. But what sort of teaching will a grudging teacher give? I can only beg of you not to teach your grudgingness. Listen to the apostle's words, which come from the true heart of charity: "I would that all men were such as I myself" (1 Cor. 7:7). See how he wanted all to be his equals; and just because charity made him so desire, he was raised above all. Man has transgressed his proper limit: created higher than the beasts, he has let covetousness carry him away, so that he might be higher than other men. And that is pride.

9. Consider now the works that pride may do: notice how they may resemble or even equal those of charity. Charity feeds the hungry, so does pride: charity, to the praise of God, pride, to the praise of itself. Charity clothes the naked, so does pride; charity fasts, so does pride; charity buries the dead, so does pride. All the good works that are willed and done by charity, may be set in motion by its contrary[,] pride, like horses harnessed to a car. But when charity is the inward driver, pride must give place – pride which is not so much

misgoverning as misgoverned. It goes ill with the man who has pride for his charioteer, for he is sure to be overturned. How can we know or see that it be not pride which governs the good deed? Where is the proof? . . . In the works themselves we can see no difference. I would go further – though it is not I, but Paul, who says it: charity goes to death, a man (that is) who has charity confesses the name of Christ and becomes a martyr, and pride also may do both. . . . "If I give all my goods to the poor, and if I give my body to burn, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing" (1 Cor. 13:3). So Holy Scripture recalls us from all this outward showing, recalls us from the surface appearance displayed before men, to the inward truth. Come back to your own conscience, and question it: pay heed, not to the visible flowering but to the root beneath the ground. Is covetousness at the root? Then you may have a show of good deeds, but of works truly good there can be none. Is charity at the root? Be easy, for no evil can be the issue. . . . The stroke of charity is more to be welcomed than the alms of pride. Come back, then, my brothers, into the place within, and in whatsoever you do, look for the witness of God. See, as he sees, the intention of your acts. If your heart does not accuse you of acting for the sake of display, it is well, you may be easy. And when you do well, have no fear of another's seeing. Fear only to act so that you may have praise for yourself; let the other see, so that God may have the praise. . . . There are two parties for whose benefit you give alms, two are hungry, the one for bread, the other for righteousness; for it is written, "Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled" (Matt. 5:6). Between these two hungering ones, you are set for the working of good: if charity is the worker, it has compassion for both, it seeks to give help to both. For while the one looks for food, the other looks for an example to follow. As you feed the first, offer yourself to the second, and you have given alms to both. You have enabled the one to give thanks for the ending of his hunger, the other to imitate the example shown him.

10. Let your works of mercy, then, proceed from a merciful heart, for then even in your love of enemies you will be showing love of brothers. Do not think that John has given no charge concerning love of one's enemy; for he has said much of brotherly charity, and it is always the brother that you love. How so? you ask. I ask in turn, Why do you love your enemy? Because you wish him to have good health in this life? but suppose that is not in his interest? Because you wish him to be rich? but if riches themselves should rob him of his sight? To marry a wife? but if that should bring him a life of bitterness? To have children? but suppose they turn out badly? Thus there is uncertainty in all things you seem to desire for your enemy, because you love him: uncertainty everywhere. Let your desire for him be that together with you he may have eternal life: let your desire for him be that he may be your brother. And if that is what you desire in loving your enemy – that

he may be your brother – when you love him, you love a brother. You love in him, not what he is, but what you would have him be. Once before, if I remember right, my dear people, I put to you this parable: Imagine the trunk of a tree lying before you: a good carpenter may see such a piece of timber, unhewn, as it was cut in the forest. He loves it at sight, but because he means to make something of it. The reason for his love is not that it may always remain as it is: as a craftsman, he has looked at what it shall be, not as lover at what it is; and his love is set upon what he will make of it, not upon its present state. Even so has God loved us sinners. God, we say, has loved sinners; for we have his word, “They that are whole need not a physician, but they that are sick” (Matt. 9:12). But surely his love for us sinners is not to the end that we remain in our sin. Like trees from the wood, we have been looked on by the Carpenter, and his thought turns to the building he will make of us, not the timber that we were. So may you look upon your enemy, standing against you with his angry passion, his biting words, his provoking insults, his unrelenting hate. But in all this you need think only that he is a *man*. You see all the hostility to yourself as of the man’s making; and you see in himself God’s making. That he was made to be a man, is the act of God; his hatred of you, his malice against you, is his own. And what do you say in your heart? “Lord have mercy upon him: forgive him his sins: put fear in him, and change him.” You love in him, not what he is but what you would have him be; and thus when you love your enemy, you love a brother. Therefore, the perfection of love is the love of an enemy, and this perfect love consists in brotherly love. . . . John, indeed, instructs us to love our brothers, Christ to love even our enemies. But you must consider why Christ has bidden you love your enemies. It cannot be with the intent that they should always remain such: that would be an instruction to hate, not to love. Consider the manner of his own love for them, which was a will that they should not continue his persecutors: “Father,” he says, “forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). The will for their pardoning was a will for their transformation: in willing that they should be transformed, he deigned to make brothers out of enemies; and so in very truth he did. He was killed, and buried. He rose again and ascended into heaven, he sent the Holy Spirit upon his disciples. They began with confidence to preach his name, they worked miracles in the name of the crucified and slain; and those who had done the Lord to death saw what was done: that blood which they had shed in fury, they drank in faith.

11. . . . If there is in you nothing of charity, all I have said comes to nothing. But if it exists at all in you, my words should be as oil upon the flames, and perhaps they may have kindled it even where it was not. . . . I have spoken in order to stir up your backwardness in the love of enemies. If a man is passionate against you, meet his passion with prayer: if he hates

you, meet his hatred with pity. It is the fever in his soul that hates you: when he is cured, he will show his gratitude. Think of the physician’s love for the sick: he does not love them *as* sick men. If he did, he would want them always to be sick. He loves the sick, not so that they may remain sick men but so that they may become healthy instead of sick. And how much he may have to suffer from them in their delirium – abuse, not seldom blows! The physician attacks the fever and excuses the man: is this loving his enemy? Truer to say that he is hating his real enemy, disease: that is what he hates, while he loves the man that strikes at him. His hatred, then, is for the fever; for the blows are struck at him by the disease, the sickness, the fever. The physician takes away the thing that shows hostility to him, in order that the man may live to give him thanks. So with you. If your enemy hates you, and hates you unjustly, you know that it is because the lusts of this world have mastery in him. If you meet his hate with hate, you are returning evil for evil; and what comes of that? I had to lament for one sick man, who hated you: now if you are hating also, I must mourn for two. But, you say, he has attacked your property, he is robbing you of some earthly possession or other: you hate him, because he is making this life strait for you. You need not suffer such straitening: for you can take your journey into the heaven above, lifting up your heart to the wide realm of freedom where in the hope of life eternal there is no straitness to be borne. Think what it really is of which he would rob you, and remember that he could not even do that, were he not permitted by the Father who “chasteneth every son that he receiveth” (Heb. 12:6). Your enemy himself is as it were God’s operating instrument to work your own healing: if God knows it to be for your good that he should despoil you, he allows it; if God knows it to be for your good to be beaten, he allows your enemy to strike you. God is using him to make you whole; pray that he too may be given healing.

12. . . . “If we love one another, God shall abide in us, and his love shall be perfected in us.” Make a beginning of love, and you shall be made perfect. For if you have begun to love, God has begun to dwell in you: love him who has begun to dwell in you, so that by a more perfect indwelling he may make you perfect. “Hereby we know that we abide in him, and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.” It is well: thanks be to God! We know that he dwells in us; and how do we know that we know it? Because John himself tells us, that, “he has given us of his Spirit.” How do we know that? How do we know that he has given you of his Spirit? Ask your heart: if it is full of charity, you have the Spirit of God. How do we know that this is evidence for you of God’s Spirit dwelling in you? Ask Paul the apostle, “Because the charity of God is shed abroad in our hearts through the Holy Spirit that is given us” (Rom. 5:5).

13. . . . Sick men, be at your ease: if such a physician has come to you,

there can be no despairing. Grave were your diseases, incurable your wounds, desperate your sickness. But if you think of the gravity of your trouble, think also of the omnipotence of the Physician. . . .

14. "Whosoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abideth in him, and he in God." We need not now insist at length, that this confessing must be not in word but in deed not of the tongue but of the life; for there are many that confess in words what their deeds deny. "And we have known, and have believed, what love God hath in us." Again, how have you known this? "God is love." He has said it before, and now says it again. You could not have a fuller commendation of love than the naming of it with God's name. You might possibly have thought little of God's gift, but can you think little of God? "God is love, and he that abideth in love, abideth in God and God abideth in him." There is a mutual indwelling of the holder and the held: your dwelling in God means that you are held by him, God's dwelling in you means that he holds you, lest you fall. Think of yourself as being made a house of God, but not like the house of bricks and mortar that carries you in the body. If that house should go from under you, you fall; but God does not fall, if you go from under him. He is whole and entire, when you desert him, whole and entire when you return to him. Your healing brings no gift to him: it is you that are cleansed, you that are amended and re-created. He is medicine to the unhealthy, rule to the crooked, light to the darkened, dwelling to the homeless. The imparting is all to you, and you may not suppose that when you come to God there is aught imparted to him – even the possession of a slave. God will not lack servants, though you refuse, though all refuse his service. God has no need of servants, but servants have need of God. Hence the words of the Psalm: "I have said unto the Lord, thou art my God" – yes, God is the true Lord – "because thou needest not my goods" (Ps. 16:2). . . . The true Lord is he who seeks nothing from us, and it goes ill with us, if we seek not him. He seeks nothing from us, yet he sought us when we were not seeking him. One sheep had gone astray: he found it and brought it home upon his shoulders rejoicing (Luke 15:4–5). Was the sheep a necessity for the shepherd, or not rather the shepherd a necessity for the sheep?

I am loath, you see, to reach the end of this Epistle, just because there is no theme on which I would fainer speak than charity; and no other Scripture extols charity with greater warmth. For you there can be no sweeter matter of discourse, no food more healthful for your souls – but only if by good living you confirm in yourselves the gift of God. Be not unthankful for this wondrous grace of God – God, who, possessing one only-begotten Son, willed not that Son to be alone, but adopted us to be his brothers and share with him eternal life.

CONTEMPORARY REFLECTION

Augustinian Exegesis and the Nature of Christian Inquirers

C. Clifton Black

As pursued in most mainline departments of religion and schools of theology, modern biblical interpretation tends to be more religiously descriptive than theologically engaged. This is to say, biblical study has become an inquiry into the history and the historically recoverable convictions of Jews and Christians in antiquity, through those literary deposits they left behind and eventually canonized within their respective religious communities. This, in a nutshell, is the historical-critical enterprise, inherited by modern scholars from their Enlightenment predecessors. As a multifaceted lens in the hands of skillful and sensitive interpreters, historical criticism has taught us much about the Bible and ought not to be despised by academia or the Church. Judiciously executed, historical criticism has enhanced our understanding of that dimension to which the Church's earliest mothers and fathers referred as Scripture's *literalis*, its historical sense.

Yet patristic interpreters were interested in more than merely the literal sense. As later popularized by the Franciscan theologian Nicholas of Lyra (c. 1270–1349),

Littera gesta docet,
Quid credas allegoria,
Moralis quid agas,
Quo tendas anagogia.
The letter carries the teaching;
Allegory, what [the church] believes;
Tropology, its conduct;
Anagogy, [that future] to which it strives.

For pre-modern interpreters, the Bible was not simply ancient literature whose history invited scientific analysis. It was scripture, pervaded by many levels of meaning, which continued to address the Church to which those

biblical books were indigenous.¹ Indeed, throughout most of the Church's existence, there was no divorce of biblical study from scriptural meditation. The reader who sought to understand the biblical word was prepared to obey God's living Word, assumed to be revealed on scripture's pages. This we can observe within the Bible itself: thus, the First Letter of John (c. 110) exemplifies an inquiry after God through meditation on the first-century Johannine tradition, known to us through the Gospel of John. That kind of inquiry continued beyond the New Testament into the Patristic era, as represented by Saint Augustine's homiletical interpretations of 1 John (c. 415). This essay suggests that Augustine's approach to Johannine interpretation strives for that in which modern historical criticism as such was neither interested nor equipped: namely, the formation of the interpreter into a more knowledgeable, faithful, loving, and mature creature of God.

Historical Background

Because theological inquiry never occurs in a vacuum, Augustine's homilies on 1 John invite historical location. These sermons were originally delivered during Easteride, 415, in the African harbor-town of Hippo Regius. Assembled to hear them was the same great congregation before whom, twenty-four years earlier, some agents of Valerius, his episcopal predecessor, had literally dragged Augustine to the priest's bench (in rough accordance with the ecclesiastical practice of the day). Hippo's Christians were for the most part poor, hot-tempered, illiterate, and superstitious, "still bogged up to the neck" in the mores of paganism. Their lives, if not Hobbesian in solitude, were indeed poor, nasty, brutish, and short. By the time Augustine ascended the *cathedra* of the Hippo diocese in 396, its Christians could hear him preach almost daily. Still, on even the coldest and rawest Sundays, they turned out in droves to stand listening, from thirty minutes to two hours at a stretch, to their bishop's subtle ruminations on John and 1 John.²

Critical Issues in Augustine's Seventh and Eighth Homilies on 1 John

Augustine's interpretive *modus operandi* sustains a sophisticated conversation among (a) every verse of the text before him, (b) that text's conceptual relationship with a broad range of Old and New Testament citations, and (c) the theological implications of this biblical synthesis for Augustine's listeners. If such a procedure seems to veer at times wildly from that employed in modern commentaries, then that deviation betokens to some

degree our truncated preoccupation with self-contained textual analysis, often with minimal comparison to other biblical texts and even less with contemporary reflection on the topics raised by those texts. By contrast, Augustine's exposition of scripture is inclined towards the cultivation of a deeper theological imagination, based on epistemological premises whose dimensions I shall consider momentarily.

The most intricately developed theme in Augustine's seventh and eighth homilies is *caritas*: charity, or love. Here is no eisegesis: even by the standards of modern exegetical scholarship, there is no more extensive, arguably no more profound biblical treatment of the topic of love than that found in 1 John 4. Following 1 John's lead, what claims does Augustine make about *caritas*?

1. Augustine's seventh sermon opens on a negative note: to live in a way that violates the command of love is to set oneself against Christ, or (in 1 John's terminology) to play the "antichrist." The reason for this is that "there was no cause but charity for the coming of Jesus . . . in the flesh" (7.2).³ Still following 1 John's train of thought, Augustine asserts, "They who speak of the world . . . are they who speak against charity" (7.3). To illustrate this point, Augustine contrasts Jesus' warning from the Sermon on the Mount with the conventional wisdom of fifth-century Hippo:

You have heard the Lord's saying: "If ye forgive men their sins, your heavenly Father also will forgive you your sins; but if ye forgive not, neither will your Father forgive you your sins" [Matt. 6:14-15]. . . . Now hear the men that speak of the world: "Are you not to have your revenge? Is he to tell the tale of what he has done to you? No, let him feel that he is dealing with a man!" We hear that sort of thing every day . . . (7.3)

Augustine is equally quick to expose any spuriously spiritual division between our love for God and our Christian siblings: "Let no man say: 'sin against a man is a small thing, it is only against God I may not sin.' How can you not be sinning against God, when you sin against love? 'God is love.' . . . Now, if you dare, act against God, and refuse to love your brother" (7.5).

2. The preceding remarks anticipate another emphasis of Augustine in his treatment of *caritas*: Aided by Paul's wording in Romans Augustine infers, "we may understand that in love is the Holy Spirit" (7.6). Those who violate the command of love (the antichrists) may enter our churches, may have been baptized, may possess the gift of prophecy, can receive the eucharist, can even bear the name of Christ. In these respects they are no different from the loving. But those who are unloving cannot receive the Holy Spirit. "This

... is the peculiar gift of the Spirit: he is the one and only fountain. To drink of it, God's Spirit calls you: God's Spirit calls you to drink of himself" (7.6). From this claim follow three corollaries, all of which Augustine develops in his eighth sermon on 1 John. The first corollary is anthropological:

Men are not to be loved as things to be consumed, but in the manner of friendship and goodwill, leading us to do things for the benefit of those we love. . . . Once you have bestowed gifts on the unfortunate, you may easily yield to the temptation to exalt yourself over him, to assume superiority over the object of your benefaction. . . . [Rather] you should want him to be your equal, that both may be subject to the one on whom no favour can be bestowed. The true Christian will never set himself up over other men. (8.5, 8)

Augustine's second corollary is theological in the narrower sense:

For if you have begun to love, God has begun to dwell in you. . . . "God is love, and he that abideth in love, abideth in God and God abideth in him" [John 4:16b]. There is a mutual indwelling of the holder and the held: your dwelling in God means that you are held by him, God's dwelling in you means that he holds you, lest you fall. (8.12, 14)

The third corollary pertains to the ongoing struggle in this life between human sin, chiefly expressed as *superbia* – pride – and the ultimate triumph of God among those who submit their wills to the operation of grace. While the God of *caritas* is the proper, beneficent pilot of every human life, in Augustine's analysis it is clear that human beings may submit their wills to base motives instead of love. Both dove and snake may be angered and fight. "The dove," however, "has no bitterness; yet it struggles to defend its nest with its beak and its wings; it strikes without harshness" (7.11).⁴ Accordingly, the quality of human conduct cannot be discerned from its outward appearance. "The difference in intention makes a difference in the acts" (7.7).

Come back to your own conscience, and question it: pay heed, not to the visible flowering but to the root beneath the ground. . . . Many things can be done that look well, yet do not issue from the root of charity. Thorns too have their flowers. Some actions seem harsh or savage, but are performed for our discipline at the dictate of charity. (8.9; 7.8)

3. Wherein is *caritas* cultivated, since "No one has ever beheld God" (1 John 4:12a)? Love is inculcated within and expressed by the Church, under the wings of the baptismal Spirit. Yet love cannot, must not, be confined within the Church's walls, dispensed solely among one's siblings in Christ.

On this point Augustine moves beyond 1 John's explicit, seemingly restrictive, injunctions of love for one another and considers also love for one's enemies: "Let your desire for [your enemy] be that together with you he may have eternal life: let your desire for him be that he may be your brother" (8.10).

Such charity is by no means one-directional, but potentially painful in its reciprocity:

Your enemy himself is as it were God's operating instrument to work your own healing: if God knows it to be for your good that he should despoil you, he allows it; if God knows it to be for your good to be beaten, he allows your enemy to strike you. God is using him to make you whole; pray that he too may be given healing. (8.11)

To summarize Augustine's description of *caritas* in these sermons on 1 John: love is not an inherent capability within human beings; it is, to the contrary a spiritual gift from the merciful God. This understanding coheres with Augustine's well-known definition of love as "the impulse of one's mind to enjoy God on his own account and to enjoy oneself and one's neighbor on account of God,"⁵ an ascent that is prompted by the prior descent of a loving, redeeming God. Charity fosters neither manipulation nor patronization among human beings but, rather, equalizes them before God. Right intention proceeds solely from the root of charity, and charity is the sole canon by which human conduct is to be blessed or execrated; praised or damned. To accept this world's values, anchored in pride, is to repudiate charity; to violate charity is to oppose the reason for Christ's having come in flesh; to deny charity to one in need is nothing other than sin against God, who is love. By contrast, to love God's creatures is to cooperate in their restoration as God's children and our siblings, just as God uses our fellow creatures – even our enemies – as instruments of our own healing.

Scriptural Interpretation as Christian Nurture

Scholars of our day are likely to find various aspects of Augustine's biblical interpretation unsatisfactory and occasionally dismaying. Judged by modern standards, his treatment does not offer a systematic, verse-by-verse analysis of the historical, traditional, or literary dimensions of the 1 John. For something approximating technical exegesis, as we understand the term, I think that we must await Calvin's commentaries, whose adherence to Renaissance norms yields an exposition more in line with modern expectations.⁶ Moreover, Augustine's equipment in biblical languages was weak, and

it is clear that he used some pre-Vulgate, Latin translation of 1 John in preparing his sermons.⁷ Augustine's handling of particular passages also seems forced, as exemplified by his ingenious reconciliation of the characteristically Johannine principle of love for one another within the Christian community (John 15:12–17) with the more generous form of Jesus' love-command, in the Synoptics, to encompass the enemy as well (Matt. 5:43–8; Luke 6:27–36). Augustine's theology emphasizes the incomparable honor bestowed on human beings who have been created and are being perfected in the image of God. When plucked from that indispensable context, Augustine's suggestion that God may allow us to be hurt for our own healing runs outrageously roughshod across not only modern sensibilities but Augustine's own. Finally, a modern exegete, trained to approach the text with scientific objectivity and sharp focus on minute detail, may be more than a little unnerved by the highly personal, expansive, emotional style of Augustine's treatment – even after allowances are made for the fact that these are not polished tractates but sermons probably delivered *ad libitum*, without Bible or manuscript, transcribed by secretaries present as the bishop preached.⁸ In these respects and others, on first encounter, Augustine's exegesis of scripture seems to exhibit, materially and methodologically, many traps that modern interpreters discipline themselves to avoid.

From Augustine, nevertheless, we have much to learn about an important matter that transcends the qualms of historical criticism. I refer to biblical interpretation in the service of nurturing Christians. I do not think that Augustine is merely setting forth a program of catechesis, for which biblical exegesis provides theological prolegomena or raw material. Rather, he is catechizing through exegesis, demonstrating for us how scriptural interpretation actually functions as Christian nurture. That demonstration, I submit, is every bit as needful in our century as in Augustine's. In his sermons on 1 John, Augustine boldly proposes that, when we approach the Bible as scripture – when we inquire after God through assiduous reading of the biblical text – it is there that we encounter the God who is relentlessly inquiring after us.

Were we to take seriously his interpretive endeavors, what might Augustine teach us about biblical interpretation and the business of theology in our day?

1. To begin with, Augustine never allows us to imagine that scriptural interpretation, properly understood, is an end in itself. Surely he would have been monumentally bored – if not appalled – by philosophical, philosophical, historical, traditional, or literary studies of the Bible undertaken for their own sake, divorced from humanity's restless quest for that God to whom the biblical witness points, the God who uses many media – the sacraments

and their observance, prayer and its practice, scripture and its exegesis – to graciously conform our wills to God's own.

Biblical study as merely an end in itself – or as nothing more than a means to such secondary objectives as fulfilling requirements for a degree or eliciting facile answers to the burning questions of the day – would be, to Augustine's thinking, a practical expression of that idolatry summed up by Paul in Romans 1:25: humanity's radically confused worship and service of the creature rather than of the Creator (2.11).

Augustine believes that education is anchored in love. The ultimate aim of education is the discovery and arousal of our love for God. Although we may think we have begun to search for God through the interpretation of scripture, in Augustinian perspective the truth is actually the reverse. *It is we who are interpreted by scripture, which reveals the God who is searching after us.* Nor is that inquiry ours to begin: if we turn to the Bible as a means of grace, it is only because God has bestirred us in that divinely appointed direction. The only fountain that can slake humanity's deepest thirst is the Holy Spirit, and "God's Spirit calls you to drink of himself" (7.6).

2. What does that tell us about the nature of God? For Augustine, the words of 1 John 4:8b crystallize what human beings can know of God: "If nothing else were said in praise of love, in all the pages of this Epistle, nothing else whatever in any other page of Scripture, and this were the one and only thing we heard from the voice of God's Spirit – 'For God is love' – we should ask for nothing more" (7.4). "Eternal Truth, true Love, beloved Eternity – all this, my God, you are": so confesses Augustine.⁹ Likewise, "the plenitude and end of the law and of all the sacred scriptures is the love of a Being who is to be enjoyed and of a Being who can share that enjoyment with us".¹⁰ With God, as with scripture, the touchstone is *caritas*. And in his homilies on 1 John, Augustine's fundamental characterization of love is of a love that *heals*. Thus, his Prologue to these sermons: "[1 John] is a book very sweet to every healthy Christian heart that savors the bread of God, and it should be constantly in the mind of God's Holy Church." Such an understanding unlocks Augustine's portrayal of Christ: Jesus is preeminently the omnipotent physician who heals the desperately ill who are incapable of healing themselves.

Think of the physician's love for the sick: he does not love them *as* sick men.

If he did, he would want them always to be sick. He loves the sick, not so that they may remain sick men but so that they may become healthy instead of sick. And how much he may have to suffer from them in their delirium – abuse, not seldom blows! . . . The physician takes away the thing that shows hostility to him, in order that the man may live to give thanks. So with you. (8.11)

Augustine believes that, through scripture as through the Incarnation, *God's sole intention is to restore all human beings to their proper dignity, to that perfection of love indigenous to their creation in God's own image*. In an age such as ours, seemingly enthralled by a Nietzschean "hermeneutics of suspicion," Augustine may offer us the most cogent, powerful justification for our adoption of a "hermeneutics of trust."¹¹ Indeed, if his appraisal be accepted, we have a reason *par excellence* to entrust ourselves to the God who meets us on scripture's pages, a reason articulated elsewhere by Augustine in the poignant language of maternal nurture:

... it is to you [my God] that I sigh night and day. . . . I realized that I was far away from you. It was as though I were in a land where all is different from your own and I heard your voice calling from on high, saying, "I am the food of full-grown adults. Grow and you shall feed on me. But you shall not change me into your own substance, as you do with the food of your body. Instead you shall be changed into me."¹²

3. With Augustine as a partner in our conversations about theological inquiry, we can acknowledge *God's power to transform us, through scripture, as interpreters of love "in deed and in truth"* (1 John 3:18). We can begin to understand that the discovery of "authorial intention" in the biblical text is practically impossible unless our own "lectorial intention" is in alignment with the grace and love of God that scripture reveals. In this connection it is critical to recall Augustine's emphasis on the intentionality of our actions, and on *caritas* as the only root of excellent performance. "Open your heart's ear!" cries Augustine to his people (6.12).

For this reason "purity in heart" – a soul continuously aspiring to love for God, that *caritas* which is the only basis for proper love of one's self – is for Augustine a *sine qua non* for the biblical theologian. What if we took seriously, as did Augustine, the transformative power of scripture? What would this mean for the ways in which we view ourselves, our neighbors, and our benevolent projects? We would recognize that the love of God and the love of neighbor are inseparably entwined. In a given moment, one of these two may receive greater emphasis, but each necessarily implies the other:

Does it then follow that he who loves his brother loves God also? Of necessity he must love God: of necessity he must love love itself. He cannot love his brother and not love love; he cannot help loving love. And if he loves love, he needs must love God: [for] in loving love, he is loving God. . . . If God is love, whoever loves love, loves God. Therefore, love your brother, and have no other care. (9.10)

From this it follows that, according to Augustine, no material distinction exists between what we sometimes contrast as "theology" and "praxis," or, as Augustine puts it, the contemplative life and the active life. Love for the neighbor is actually a form of contemplation in the midst of action. In no case of which I am aware does Augustine suggest that love for the neighbor is exclusively coterminous with the active life, or that the province of love for God is exclusively defined as the contemplative life. Any detachment of spirituality from social witness can only corrupt them both. Jesus is honored by both Mary at his feet and Martha in her kitchen.¹³

Further, if guided by Augustine in our inquiry after God, we would recognize that humility is the proper sense of self for those who bear the name of Christ, who humbled himself for our healing. "God has humbled himself – and still man is proud!"¹⁴ Let us be clear that Augustine never confused humility with self-contempt, as have too many Christians after him. Created in the image of God, with the capacity to be elevated to a God who desires us, human beings possess extraordinary dignity in Augustinian thought. This Augustine dared to believe amidst a civilization collapsing around him, a blood-drenched society in which "a real man" or a "real woman" would demand vendetta when injured (7.3). Yet Augustine insistently reminded his people of the gospel's utterly counter-cultural strategy, predicated not on "nature red in tooth and claw,"¹⁵ but on God's subversive love, which enkindles within us that God-given nobility within ourselves from which we have gotten so far out of touch. To understand scripture is to *stand under* its paradoxical yet invincible convictions: that humanity's future lies not in revenge but in reconciliation; that only under Christ's discipline can his disciples know healthy freedom; that the needy whom we benefit are every bit our benefactors, through whom God is reforming us in Christ.

4. Finally, if we pay attention to Augustine the exegete, we will learn afresh that *scripture's native habitat is the church catholic*, which is neither interchangeable with nor reducible to any party, sect, or denomination. A child of monastic spirituality, Augustine could appreciate more easily than we that scripture is as much a source of *understanding* as of information. By confessing the Bible to be scripture ("inspired") and canon ("regulative") for that family of God into which they have been baptized, Christians have found *in* scripture their hermeneutic (their framework for understanding) and in the Holy Spirit their epistemic instrument (the means by which they are able to understand). Across history, however, scripture has not been the Church's solitary canon. Scripture has been, and in most congregations continues to be, read within the authoritative context of the Church's prayers, liturgies, creeds, disciplines, and practices. Such was certainly the

case for Augustine, who loved Christ's Church as "the mother of us all"¹⁶ and who came to accept that it is, indeed, the walls of the Church that make the Christian (8.2).

In an important study of the role of scripture in early Christian monasticism, Douglas Burton-Christie suggests that the desert mothers and fathers "saw the sacred texts as projecting worlds of possible meaning that they were called upon to enter."¹⁷ Others have argued that patristic allegorists did not so much assimilate scripture to their ambient culture as they profoundly Christianized that culture's dominant worldview.¹⁸ I can think of no mandate more pressing upon Christian theology in our day than this: to entrust the children of God, within the embrace of the Church's prayers and praise, to those radically new possibilities of divine imagination and holy conduct that God offered us through scripture.

Some Conclusions

In an illuminating essay first published almost twenty years ago, David Steinmetz argued that medieval hermeneutical theory was superior to historical criticism in at least this respect: "The medieval theory of levels of meaning in the biblical text, with all its undoubted defects, flourished because it is true, while the modern theory of a single meaning" — namely, that which was originally intended by the author of the biblical text — "with all its demonstrable virtues, is false."¹⁹ Relatively few biblical interpreters would now cling to the exegetical quest for a single, original meaning. On the contrary: owing to the complexities of texts and their reception, the Bible is currently subject to an interpretive range so broad, at times seemingly limitless, that it would have left a medieval allegorist's head spinning.

It now appears that, for all its inadequacies, an Augustinian hermeneutical theory is superior to that of our own in another, even more crucial respect. Augustine defended the proposition, increasingly alien to modernity, that scripture discloses to its inquirers the God who is utterly desirous and uniquely able, by means of such instruments as scripture itself, to heal a diseased creation. Properly interpreted, scripture is for us both a mirror of our own flawed nobility and a window through which God's love radiates the healing of our conduct, our imagination, our most truthful understanding of ourselves and others. Although scripture, like any good gift, is susceptible to abuse, the nourishment for which we are most famished lies, not in ourselves, but in the scripture that nurtures.

Notes

- 1 See Harry Caplan, "The Four Senses of Scriptural Interpretation and the Mediaeval Theory of Preaching," *Speculum*, vol. 4 (1929), pp. 282–90.
- 2 F. van der Meer, *Augustine the Bishop: The Life and Work of a Father of the Church* (London and New York: Sheed & Ward, 1961), p. 46.
- 3 Parenthetical references are to Augustine's homilies on 1 John in *Augustine: Later Works*, ed. John Burnaby (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1955).
- 4 As translated by Mary T. Clark, *Augustine of Hippo: Selected Writings* (New York, Ramsey and Toronto: Paulist Press, 1984), p. 307.
- 5 Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, trans. R. P. H. Green (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 149, 3.10.16.
- 6 See John Calvin, *The Gospel According to St. John 11–12 and the First Epistle of John*, in David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance (eds), *Calvin's Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), pp. 227–315.
- 7 Gerald Bonner, "Augustine as Biblical Scholar," in P. R. Ackroyd and C. F. Evans (eds), *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. 550–1.
- 8 See R. J. Deferrai, "Augustine's Method of Composing and Delivering Sermons," *American Journal of Philology*, vol. 40 (1922), pp. 193–219.
- 9 Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin, 1961), pp. 147, 7.10.
- 10 Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D. W. Robertson, Jr. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1958), pp. 30, 1.35.39.
- 11 Thus, Richard B. Hays, "Salvation by Trust? Reading the Bible Faithfully," *Christian Century*, vol. 114 (February 26, 1997), pp. 218–23.
- 12 Augustine, *Confessions*, pp. 147, 7.10.
- 13 See Augustine, Sermons 53 and 54 in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 1st series, vol. 6, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. R. G. MacMullen (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), pp. 427–30.
- 14 Augustine, Sermon 162.6.
- 15 Tennyson, *In Memoriam* 55.4.
- 16 Augustine, *Confessions*, pp. 31, 1.11.
- 17 Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 299.
- 18 David Dawson, *Allegorical Readers and Cultural Revision in Ancient Alexandria* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Francis M. Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
- 19 David Steinmetz, "The Superiority of Pre-critical Exegesis," *Theology Today*, vol. 37 (1980), p. 38.