3

SERVING THE FOOD OF FULL-GROWN ADULTS

Confessions of a Parish Priest

If remembered at all, Augustine of Hippo (354–430) is associated with original sin, predestination, and other ideas consigned by many to a theological flea market. I shall not play the apologist for Augustine's thought, even less attempt his rehabilitation among present-day skeptics.[1] Though astonishingly prolific, he enjoyed no ivory tower. His pivotal masterpieces—*Confessions*, *The Trinity*, *The City of God*, to name but three—were written on his career's margins, from 396 until his death, as a diligent bishop in Hippo Regius, a scruffy African harbor-town. In those days a bishop was not the diocesan administrator that some modern denominations elect. Essentially, Augustine served as priest of a large parish comprising largely illiterate, hot-tempered, superstitious Christians whose lives, if not Hobbesian in solitude, were poor, nasty, brutish, and short. His days were consumed by pastoral care, case-arbitration in municipal court, humanization of Rome's penal machinery, and trawling a bottomless river of correspondence. His prayer life suffered; he complained of being sucked into useless, time-wasting duties that he nevertheless discharged with scrupulous care.[2]

1. An orientation to Augustine's mature thought might begin with *The Augustine Catechism*, ed. Rotelle. For a sympathetic presentation of Augustinian theology, Mallard, *Language and Love*, is recommended.

2. See his *Letters to Eudoxius* (48.1) and *To Marcellinus* (133) in NPNF 1, 294–95,

Among Augustine's daily responsibilities no activity outstripped preaching. "Here," Pamela Bright comments, "is his home and place, his preferred environment."[3] He preached *ex cathedra*, from an elevated chair, almost every day, occasionally more than once a day. Depending on the liturgical circumstances, his sermons ranged in length from ten minutes to two hours before a standing congregation sans pews. His extant sermons were transcribed on the spot by *notarii*, much like today's court stenographers, while the bishop preached extemporaneously, without manuscript or notes, reading then laying aside a biblical book. Whatever their degree of material accuracy, these transcriptions no more convey his verbal firepower than a newspaper report could capture the experience of "I Have a Dream," delivered at the Lincoln Memorial by Martin Luther King Jr. (1963). Like King, Augustine was a natural stemwinder. On even the coldest Sundays his listeners turned out in droves.[4] They clapped and shouted, to the preacher's dismay: "What have I said? Why are you applauding? We're still battling the problem, and you've already started cheering" (*Serm. Mark* 8:34).[5] "[T]he Lord's trumpet blows through Augustine's mouth," marveled Paulinus of Nola (*Letter to Romanianus*). Even theological opponents conceded his preaching's power: alleging his inability "to discern a Christian in [Augustine]," Secundinus the Manichee reckoned him "on all occasions a born orator, a veritable god of eloquence."[6]

A professional rhetorician before his conversion to Christianity (*Conf.* 4.2), Augustine carried every homiletical arrow in his quiver. As a preacher, what did he think he was accomplishing? On the anniversary of his ordination, he tells us:

> To rebuke those who stir up strife, to cheer up the faint-hearted, to support the weak, to refute the gospel's opponents, to be wary

470–71.

3. *Augustine and the Bible*, xv. Scholarly treatments of Augustine the preacher are scarce. Still serviceable are older assessments by Polmann, *The Word of God*, 123–76, and van der Meer, *Augustine the Bishop*, 405–67; more recently, Lawless, "Augustine of Hippo as Preacher"; Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenate*, 156–93; Bright, *Augustine and the Bible*, 243–315. Specimens of Augustine's sermons are conveniently available in Rotelle, *Augustine on the Sunday Gospel*.

4. Van der Meer, *Augustine the Bishop*, 3–78, 129–98, 388–402.

5. Trans. adapted from *Sermons (94A–147A) on the New Testament*, 32.

6. Quotations of Secundinus and Paulinus from van der Meer, *Augustine the Bishop*, 412.

> in sidestepping their traps, to teach the unlearned, to shake the lazy awake, to discourage those consumed by buying and selling, to put the proud in their place, to hold the quarrelsome in check, to help the needy, to liberate the oppressed, to encourage the good, to endure the evil, to love all people. (*Serm.* 340.3)[7]

Augustine yearned for escape from the rat race. "And yet," he confessed,

> It's the gospel itself that scares me [away from a softer way of life]. Sure, I could say: What business is it of mine to bore people? To reprove the wicked by telling them, "Quit acting wickedly. Act like this. Stop doing that"? What do I get out of burdening people? . . . Just let me sign for what *I've* received. Why should I give an account for others? Because of the gospel. It's terrifying. Nobody could outdo me in enjoying anxiety-free leisure. There's nothing better, nothing more pleasant than rummaging through [Scripture's] divine treasure chest, with nobody making a commotion. It's sweet. It's good. But to preach, to refute, to correct, to build up, to manage for everybody—that's a great burden, a great weight, a great labor. Who wouldn't run away from such a job? It's the gospel that reins me in. (*Serm.* 339.4)[8]

Nothing But Charity

Augustine is responsible for the first and most influential handbook for preachers in the Western church: *De doctrina christiana* (begun 396; completed, 426).[9] A mature work containing almost all the bishop ever wrote on the art of preaching, *Teaching Christianity* commends a preacher's entrée to the interpretive process through a door very different from that opened by most theological curricula in twenty-first-century North America. Unlike critics who "objectively" ground exegesis in the historical or literary particulars of pericopae, and at odds with self-styled ideological theorists who "subjectively" locate interpretation within their subcultures' ideological experiences, Augustine begins with an unshakable theological conviction so *outré* that its kairos may have arrived: "Scripture commands nothing but charity" (*De doct. chr.* 3.10.36).

7. Trans. adapted from *Sermons (306–340A) on the Saints*, 293.

8. Ibid., 282 (alt.).

9. A fresh translation is Hill's *Teaching Christianity*. On the influence of this Christian classic from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, see English, *Reading and Wisdom*.

Caritas, for Augustine, is a love properly ordered and conformed to the way things really are: love for the triune God, in whom alone genuine fulfillment is found; love for the neighbor, with whom this love for God is shared in common (*De doct. chr.* 1.22.2—35.39). That indivisibly double love is *the* epistemological principle of all exegesis and preaching that are set to rights. Hence, Augustine's audacious claims: "Some may think they have understood scripture, but if their views fail to build up this double love of God and neighbor, they have not yet succeeded in understanding" (1.36.40). Conversely, those whose views edify that double love will escape serious interpretive error, even if they mistake what the biblical authors actually had in mind.[10] "Therefore, a person strengthened by faith, hope, and love, and who steadfastly holds on to them, has no need of the scriptures except to instruct others" (1.39.43).[11] Love is not an inherent human capability; it is a spiritual gift from the merciful God. Thus, Augustine defines 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" (3.10.15), an ascent prompted by a loving, redeeming God's anterior descent. *Caritas* fosters neither manipulation nor patronization among human beings; instead, it equalizes them before God.

> People 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 them, to assume superiority over the object of your benefaction . . . [I]nstead you should want them to be your equal, that both [you and they] may be subject to the one on whom no favor can be bestowed. The true Christian will never set himself up over other people. (*Ep. Jo.* 8.5, 8)

Right intention grows solely from the root of love, and love is the sole canon by which human conduct is to be blessed or execrated, praised or condemned. To accept this world's values, anchored in pride (*superbia*), is to repudiate *caritas*; to violate *caritas* is to oppose the reason for Christ's having come in the flesh; to deny *caritas* 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

10. For much in this paragraph I am indebted to Babcock, "*Caritas* and Signification."

11. Trans. Green in *Augustine:* De Doctrina Christiana, 53.

siblings, just as God uses our fellow creatures—even our enemies—as instruments of our own healing (*Ep. Jo.* 7.2, 5; 8.9, 11).

Augustine's relentless concentration on this twin love of God and neighbor probably accounts for the remarkable lack of interest in technique in *Teaching Christianity*. Its "strategies for preaching" can be summed up in a few pieces of practical advice: know your listeners; expound the Scriptures; people must understand, so be clear; pray for clarity; if good preaching is beyond your ability, don't worry: it is better to say wisely what you cannot say well than to say well what you cannot say wisely (4.4.6—5.7; 4.8.22—10.25). Of primary importance: "Abundantly eloquent is the preacher whose life can speak" (4.27.59).

For Augustine, Christian doctrine frames the context within which Scripture should be interpreted and preached. "So when, on closer inspection, you see that it is still uncertain how something is to be punctuated or pronounced, you should refer it to the rule of faith [*regulam fidei*], which you have received through the plainer passages of scriptures and the authority of the church [*ecclesiae auctoritate*]" (*De doct. chr.* 3.2.2). There, in a single sentence, is just about everything historical criticism was designed to combat: an interpretive magisterium and a foisting of dogma upon the biblical word. In fairness, let the church confess and repent of the dangerously excessive influence over biblical interpretation that its hierarchy has sometimes wielded. Lately, however, our homiletical sins run along a different line. Whether sipping or swilling from the wells of critical theory and pop psychotherapy, preachers who would never dream of warning their listeners away from the Seven Deadly Sins will, without a moment's hesitation, trumpet a sermon series on the Seven Habits of Highly Effective Churches.[12] Nor have theologians exhibited thumping success in disentangling from the biblical witness one intellectual construct—the rule of faith—without implanting listless, secularized alternatives in its place.[13] At risk is a generation of sadly backward Anselmians whose understanding desperately seeks faith. Augustine offers teachers and preachers an alternative: to lead our listeners back into the depths of the triune God, into whose merciful likeness we are being transformed.[14]

12. Witten, *All Is Forgiven*, assesses the tension that stretches contemporary Christian preaching between traditional piety and secularity's individualistic relativism.

13. The tide may be turning. For hopeful signs Braaten and Jenson, *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church*.

14. See chapter 2.

Faithful Exegesis as Christian Nurture

Each of the church's doctors has bequeathed to us peculiar gifts for Scripture's interpretation: Origen (*ca.* 185—*ca.* 254), the beginnings of a theology of exegesis; Theodore of Mopsuestia (*ca.* 350–428), respect for the Bible's historical particularities; Jerome (*ca.* 346–420), mastery of ancient languages and their translation.[15] From Augustine we receive an inestimable legacy of scriptural interpretation in the service of nurturing Christians. Not merely does he set forth a program of catechesis, for which biblical study provides raw material. Augustine catechizes *through* exegesis, showing us how biblical interpretation *functions as* Christian nurture. Augustine boldly proposes that, when we approach the Bible as Scripture—when we inquire after God through assiduous study of the biblical text—it is there we encounter the God who is relentlessly inquiring after us.

Were we to accept his challenge, what might Augustine teach us about the scriptural interpretation in our day?

Who Is Interpreting Whom?

Augustine refuses to support us in the illusion that biblical interpretation is an end in itself. He would surely have been bored—if not appalled—by philological, philosophical, historical, traditional, or literary studies undertaken for their own sake, divorced from humanity's restless quest for God: the 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 an end in itself—or merely as an instrument for derivative objectives like fulfilling requirements for a degree or eliciting a facile answer to some burning question of our day—is, for Augustine, nothing more than practical expression of that idolatry summed up by Paul in Rom 1:25: humanity's radically confused worship and service of the creature rather than of the Creator. "Suppose," Augustine muses,

> a man should make for his fiancée a ring, and she should prefer the ring given her to the betrothed who made it for her. Would not her heart be convicted of infidelity in respect of the very

15. Consult Ackroyd and Evans, *Cambridge History of the Bible*, 1:412–586.

> gift of her fiancé, though what she loved were what he gave. Certainly let her love his gift; but if she should say, "The ring is enough, I don't want to see his face again," what would we say of her? . . . Yet surely the pledge is given by the betrothed, just that in his pledge he himself may be loved. Just so, God has given you all these things: therefore, love him who made them. There is more that [God] would give you—even himself, their Maker. (*Ep. Jo.* 2.11)[16]

As Augustine notes elsewhere (*Cat. rud.* 4.8; 10.15—15.23), education is anchored in love. Education's ultimate aim is the discovery and arousal of our love for God. Though we may think we have begun to search for God through scriptural interpretation, for Augustine 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 stirred 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" (*Ep. Jo.* 7.6).

Who Is God For Us?

For Augustine, 1 John 4 crystallizes 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 all other pages of scripture, and this were the only thing we heard from the voice of God's Spirit—'For God is love'—we should ask for nothing more" (*Ep. Jo.* 7.4). "Eternal Truth, true Love, beloved Eternity—all this, my God, you are" (*Conf.* 7.10). 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" (*De doct. chr.* 1.35.39). With God, as with Scripture, the touchstone is *caritas*, a love that *heals*. This insight provides a key to his characterization of Christ: Jesus is preeminently the physician, who cures those incapable of healing themselves (Matt 9:12; Mark 2:17a; Luke 5:31).

> Consider the manner of Christ's own love . . . : "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

16. *Augustine: Later Works* (trans. Burnaby, alt.), 275–76.

> brothers out of enemies; and so in very truth, he did . . . Think of the physician's love for the sick: he does not love them *as* sick people. If he did, he would want them always to be sick. He loves the sick, not so that they may remain sick people, 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 patient may live to give him thanks. So it is with you. (*Ep. Jo.* 8.10–11)

If in our exegesis we took Augustine seriously, we would realize that, through Scripture as through the incarnation,[17] *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 like ours, smitten by a Nietzschean "hermeneutics of suspicion" whose goal is the subversion of biblical texts assumed to be pervasively "dangerous to your health and survival,"[18] Augustine may offer us the most cogent, powerful justification for adopting a "hermeneutics of trust."[19] 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 by Augustine in the language of maternal nurturance: "It is to you [my God] that I sigh by 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.

17. "The Lord Jesus Christ has come in the flesh for no reason other . . . than to vivify, save, liberate, redeem, and illuminate those who formerly were in death, weakness, slavery, prison, and under the shadow of sins" (*Pecc. Mer.* 1.26.39).

18. Schüssler Fiorenza, "Will to Choose or to Reject," 130; italicized in the original. While she acknowledges that "women in all walks of life testify to a different, inspiring, challenging, and liberating experience with the Bible" (ibid.), Schüssler Fiorenza's interpretive model "locates revelation not in biblical texts but in the experience of women struggling for liberation from patriarchy" (ibid., 136). It is no authorization of oppressive structures to observe that such a norm is (formally) narrowly experiential rather than expansively scriptural and (materially) gynocentric, not theocentric.

19. Thus, Hays, "Salvation by Trust?" Happily, Hays advocates a critical approach to the Bible that welcomes the liberationist refusal to accept everything in the text at face value while rejecting the liberationist preoccupation with ideological exposé whose primary norm—a particular experience of oppression—is unduly credulous. However, his alternative—"that we take our cue from the Reformation and return to scripture itself" (ibid., 219)—does not go far enough in answering the liberationist challenge. Unless something like Augustine's attitude toward Scripture is claimed—that a loving God intends Scripture to heal us, not make us sicker—then neither Schüssler Fiorenza nor Hays nor anyone else would have good reason to entrust oneself to the Bible.

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'" (*Conf.* 7.10).[20]

Transformation, Not Information

As a serious partner in our conversation between exegesis, teaching, and preaching, Augustine reminds us of *God's power to transform us, through Scripture, as interpreters of love in deed and in truth*. We begin to comprehend that the discovery of authorial intention in Scripture is practically impossible unless our own lectorial intention is properly attuned to the grace and love of God revealed by Scripture. "Open your heart's ear!" cries Augustine to his church (*Ep. Jo.* 6.12). One who approaches the text from a posture of hostility or fear will be inevitably deaf to Scripture's resonance and blind in guiding others into Scripture's deepest mysteries—no matter how superficially intriguing, clever, or persuasive that reader's interpretations may be. For this reason "purity in heart"—a soul continuously aspiring in love for God, that *caritas* that is the only basis for proper love of one's self (*Mor.* 1.26.48)—is for Augustine a *sine qua non* for the biblical interpreter. Bluntly stated, there is more penetrating scriptural exegesis in the steady recitation of the Psalms by an unschooled grandmother to children of wandering minds and runny noses than in a hundred essays generated by a biblical scholar whose sights are set no higher than his own promotion. The one nurtures *caritas*; the other engorges pride.

If we took as seriously as did Augustine Scripture's transformative power, what might this mean for the ways in which we view ourselves, our neighbors, and our projects? First, we would see ourselves as Christ sees us: "Like trees from the wood, we have been looked upon by the Carpenter, and his thought turns to the building he will make of us, not to the timber that we were" (*Ep. Jo.* 8.10). Second, we would comprehend the inextricable entwinement of our love for God and our love for neighbor. At a given moment one of these two may receive greater emphasis, but each necessarily implies the other (ibid., 9.10; see Mark 12:29–31). From this it follows that no material distinction exists between what we sometimes contrast as "theology" and "praxis," or, as Augustine prefers, the contemplative life and the active life. Love for the neighbor is actually a form of

20. *Saint Augustine: Confessions* (trans. Pine-Coffin), 147 (alt).

contemplation in the midst of action. As far as I am aware, Augustine nowhere suggests that love for the neighbor is exclusively coterminous with the active life, or that love for God is restricted to 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 (*Serm. Luke* 10:38–42; *Serm. Phil* 3:3–16).

Guided by Augustine in scriptural interpretation, we would recognize humility as the proper sense of self for those claimed by the Messiah who gave himself up for our healing. "God has humbled himself—and still man is proud!" (*Serm. 1 Cor* 12:31–13:13). 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 a capacity for elevation to the God who desires us, human beings possess extraordinary dignity in Augustinian thought (*De trin.* 14.4.6; 14.8.11; 14.14.18; 14.16.22; 15.8.4; *Civ. Dei* 12.1.3). Augustine dared to assert this amidst a civilization collapsing around him, a blood-soaked society in which "a real man" would demand vendetta when injured (*Ep. Jo.* 7.3). Yet Augustine reminded his congregation of the gospel's utterly countercultural strategy, predicated not on "nature red in tooth and claw,"[21] but on God's subversive love, which enkindles 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 as much our benefactors, through whom God re-forms us in Christ.

Where We Meet Molds Where We Live

Finally, if we apprenticed ourselves to Augustine we would learn afresh that *Scripture's native habitat is the church catholic*, which is neither interchangeable with nor reducible to any party, sect, or denomination—much less some wing of the academy that feeds parasitically on religious organizations. A child of monastic spirituality, Augustine could appreciate more easily than we that Scripture is as much *a network of formative understanding* as of sheer information. Traditionally, the church has not simply "applied" hermeneutics to the Bible, as a diner slathers mustard

21. Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, 55.4.

on pumpernickel. 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, as W. J. Abraham has demonstrated.[22] In most congregations Scripture 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" (*Conf.* 1.11) and who came to accept that it is, indeed, the walls of the church that make the Christian (ibid., 8.2; *Util. cred.* 14.31).

Investigating Scripture's role in early Christian monasticism, Douglas Burton-Christie has suggested that the desert mothers and fathers "saw the sacred texts as projecting worlds of possible meaning that they were called upon to enter."[23] With differences of emphasis yet equal cogency, David Dawson[24] and Frances Young[25] have argued that patristic typologists and allegorists did not so much assimilate Scripture to their ambient culture as they Christianized its dominant worldview. Say what we may about the follies of monasticism, and the record goes unchanged: by their preaching the monks educated God's children to entrust themselves to those radically new possibilities of sacred imagination and holy conduct that God, true Love and beloved Eternity, still offers through Scripture. By nurturing their communities with the preached word, embraced by the church's prayers and praise, they kept Christian faith alive.[26] Will our children's grandchildren be able to say the same of us?

Serving the Food of Full-Grown Adults

> Wondrous is the profundity of your utterances. We see their surface before us, enticing us as children. But wondrous is their profundity—my God, wondrous their profundity! To look into

22. *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology.*
23. *The Word in the Desert*, 299.
24. *Allegorical Readers and Cultural Revision.*
25. *Biblical Exegesis.*
26. See chapter 4.

> them is to experience a shudder, the shudder of awe and the trembling of love. (*Conf.* 12.14.17)[27]

Today's scholars will find many aspects of Augustine's exegesis unsatisfactory and occasionally dismaying. Judged by our standards, his commentaries do not offer systematic, verse-by-verse analysis of the Bible's historical, traditional, or literary dimensions. His equipment in biblical languages was weak, and it is clear that he used pre-Vulgate, Latin translations in preparing his sermons.[28] Modern interpreters, trained to approach the text with scientific objectivity and sharp focus on minute detail, may be more than slightly unnerved by his highly personal, expansive emotional style—even allowing for the fact that his commentaries were not polished tractates but sermons, probably delivered *ad libitum*. In such respects Augustine's scriptural exegesis seems to spring many traps that today's scholars train themselves to sidestep.

And yet: Augustine's approach to biblical exegesis was wiser and deeper than much of our current fare. He was seized by the conviction that the Word of the LORD is not rhetoric pragmatically invoked for a church's consolation and consolidation. Nor is it an arrogant harangue of this world's ignorance, lovelessness, and abuse of power. The Word released in the preached word, the Word conveyed through the sacrament, really changes us, our listeners, and our world—sometimes patently, often secretly, but always actually, blessedly, stunningly. Revealed by the Lord Jesus Christ is the God of healing eloquence, the very Word made flesh, whose sweetness is creating within us a new character: one nurtured by the Spirit, stamped with faith and hope and *caritas*.[29]

"The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there."[30] That is among the most valuable lessons any time-traveler can learn. David Steinmetz has argued that medieval 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 be-

27. Trans. Finan, "St Augustine on the 'mira profunditas,'" 173.

28. See Bonner, "Augustine as Biblical Scholar."

29. "Believe steadfastly in God and, as far as you can, entrust yourself wholly to Him. Do not choose to be, so to speak, your own master and under your own dominion, but proclaim yourself the servant of him who is our kindest and most helpful Lord. For, if you do this, He will not cease to lift yourself up to Himself, and He will allow nothing to happen to you which is not for your own good, even though you do not know it" (*Sol.* 1.15.30).

30. Hartley, *The Go-Between*, 3.

cause it is true, while the modern theory of a single meaning"—namely, that which was originally intended by the biblical author—"with all its demonstrable virtues, is false."[31] Few twenty-first-century biblical interpreters would cling to the exegetical quest for a single original meaning. At least in some sectors, the pendulum has now swung to the opposite extreme: owing to our bedazzlement by the complexities of texts and their receptions, the Bible is currently subject to an interpretive range so broad, at times seemingly boundless, that it would have left a medieval allegorist's head spinning.

For all its inadequacies, an Augustinian hermeneutic is superior to that of our own day in another, more crucial respect. Augustine defended the proposition, increasingly alien to postmodernity, that Scripture discloses to Christians the God who is persistently desirous and uniquely able, by means of instruments like Scripture, to cure a diseased creation. Properly interpreted, Scripture is for us both a mirror of our 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 of others. Of the fact that Scripture, like any good gift, is susceptible to abuse, Hippo's bishop was anything but naïve. Among those of our day who abandon a church judged irremediably corrupt for a subculture in which biblical interpretation can be conducted without taint, Augustine would have recognized the aroma of Donatism.[32] The fundamental problems lie, not in the Bible, but in ourselves. Conversely, the nourishment for which we are most famished lies, not in ourselves, but in the Scripture that nurtures.

> What I serve you isn't mine. What you eat, I eat. What you live on, I live on. We have in heaven a common pantry. That, you see, is where the Word of God comes from. (*Serm. Mark* 8:1–9)[33]

31. Steinmetz, "The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis," 38.
32. See Bonner, *St. Augustine of Hippo*, 276–311.
33. *Sermons (94A–147A) on the New Testament* (trans. Hill; alt.) 24.