

Introduction to *De Doctrina Christiana*  
St. Augustine (354-430)

I. Aim and Circumstances

1. Augustine spent half his life in philosophical and rhetorical studies and there is a great deal of the ancient school master and professor in Augustine--a conviction of the importance of detail, devotion to consistency of interpretation, reverence for canonical texts as authorities, esp. Scripture, and to a lesser extent, classic texts from antiquity. Augustine owed a lot to his former training and career. In *DDC*, the old education and his proposals for a distinctively Christian one meet. It is where the ancient liberal tradition or classical culture meets Christianity and is modified, elevated, and reformed for Christian purposes.

2. The purpose of *DDC*, on which Augustine worked for some 30 years, is to systematize for the benefit of others, especially young preachers as well as laity, the observations and principles that had become apparent to him in his study of the Bible and to enable readers of it to be their own interpreters. He wishes to provide fundamental instructions so one may pick up the Bible and read it wisely. He wants to help Christians learn from the Bible.

3. The title of the book indicates that it applies to the task of teaching Christianity first to oneself and then to others. It also embraces the basic teachings of Christianity (mere Christianity) which can be drawn from Scripture. See also here his *Enchiridion (Handbook)*. *DDC* is a guide to the discovery and communication of what is taught in the Bible.

4. *DDC* is written for all who have the will and the wit to learn, lay people and preachers and bishops. Some have seen it as a manual for preachers, but he includes in his discussion other forms of communication (debates, books, letters). Perhaps the needs of preachers are upper most in his mind, but much of his advice would go well beyond many of them.

5. *DDC* has been called a manifesto for a specifically Christian culture (e.g., Marrou), esp. because of what it has to say about the value of learning outside the Church in classical culture, education, and philosophy (where Aug. himself received his training). This is a major theme of the work, but not its primary purpose. Some have thought that Augustine was seeking to construct a Christian alternative to classical Greco-Roman culture of his time. More to the accurate point, he was attempting to fulfill St. Paul's admonition in the pastorals to seek and make use of "sound teaching."

6. Augustine may have begun *DDC* in 395 or 397, and wrote the first three books. Not until some 30 years later did he write the last book (see 3. 78). He may have let the project go because of an illness, writers block, and pastoral obligations. He began *DDC* the same time he undertook to compose his *Confessions* which is his spiritual autobiography. The *Confessions* presents his personal feelings and experiences that *DDC* presents in a more academic way: the ascent by reasoning and contemplation to God, the wise and unchanging one, from the world that is changeable and incomplete; the temptations of sex and other habits; the "pacts" or contracts that bind human communities and underlie their cultures; the burdensomeness and valuelessness of pagan, classical education; contempt for rhetorical showmanship.

II. Summary and Significance

7. The basic outline of the book. Part one covers books 1-3 and is concerned with the discovery of what must be learned from Scripture, its content. Part two is found in book 4 and

is devoted to the presentation or proclamation of the content of Scripture. *DDC* is about the content and communication of the Christian faith.

Books 1-3: *Inventio* (discovery of meaning)  
Book 4: *Eloquutio* (communicating discovered meaning)

A. Book One: Things and Signs

1. Things
2. Signs
3. Things to be enjoyed and used, and things doing the enjoying and using
4. Discourse on God and our restoration to Him through Christ
5. Discourse of the right order of love: *ordo amoris*
6. The end of reading the Scriptures as love for God and man
7. How to interpret the signs or words of Scripture so as to love God and man

B. Book Two: Unknown Signs

1. Education in the original languages
2. Education in the liberal studies (transformation of Greek Paideia for Christian purposes)

C. Book Three: Ambiguous Signs

1. Discerning between literal and figurative expressions
2. Interpreting the meaning of literal and figurative expressions

D. Book Four: Christian Rhetoric or Preaching

1. Ciceronian rhetoric for Christian ends
2. The training and life of the Christian rhetor

8. Augustine envisions three kinds of critics to his work: (1) those who cannot understand his work; (2) those who will fail to apply it; (3) those who consider it unnecessary because illumination of the Bible should come straight from God a part from a human teacher (Augustine had argued this point in an earlier work called *The Teacher*, he now retracts that point of view).

The *City of God*, *Confessions*, and *DDC* are Augustine's the major works that deal with the relation of Christianity to classical culture. Three things show the importance of *DDC*: (1) the number of mss. in the Carolingian Renaissance was surpassed only by the *City of God*; (2) an impressive list of leading medieval and Renaissance authorities knew, read, and used the work (Cassiodorus, Raban Maur, Abelard, Thomas Aquinas, Roger Bacon, Erasmus); (3) an entire conference was devoted to it at the University of Notre Dame, April 4-7, 1991, with a resulting two volume proceedings.

### III. Outline of *DDC*

#### 9. Book One: Things and Signs

- 9.1 To understand the teachings of Scripture, we need a knowledge of things and signs. The subject of Book One is things as things, things as signs and signs as things. Human beings, as a kind of thing, should enjoy some things and cleave to them in love, and use other things, relating them or subordinating them to the attainment of

what they love. Only God is to be loved, all other things used for the sake of loving God.

- 9.2 To enjoy God, the human eye must be purged of its fascination with the world, and travel to God along his chosen way, accepting the healing of Christ via the incarnation and taking advantage of the support provided by the Church.
- 9.3 Augustine's approach to life and faith as a Christian is under the heavy influence of Plotinus the "platonist" as Augustine called him, the neo-platonist as academics today call him (and his followers because of their study and revival of Plato). Was Augustine more a neo-Platonists or a Christian?
- 9.4 The balance of Book One is concerned with understanding love in terms of use and enjoyment: (1) should human use each other or enjoy each other? (2) In what way should they love themselves? (3) Which of the things to be used should also be loved? (4) Is it possible to hate oneself? (5) Can all people be loved equally and in practice? (6) Does the command to love one's neighbor include angels? (7) Does God in loving us use us or enjoy us?

The reason for this investigation is the following: To love God and neighbor is the fulfillment of the law, so our interpretation of the law or of the Bible should be such that this love of God and others is fulfilled. This is called the principle of Charity.

## **10. Book Two: Unknown Signs**

- 10.1 In Book Two, Augustine takes up the study of signs as signs, the first work in the discipline called "semiotics," the study of signs and symbols (see other handout). His view of signs enables him to explore the boundaries and interrelations of communities or subcultures which share symbol systems.
- 10.2 Augustine defines signs as things which stand for other things, and distinguishes between natural (in nature) and given (conventional) signs, the latter reflecting human will and intention. Words are linguistic signs and are problematic in the Bible because of the diversity of languages used in it (Hebrew, Greek, Aramaic), and because God in his providence has made the signs difficult to understand to keep us humble (signs both reveal and conceal).
- 10.3 Problems arise from two kinds of signs: (1) unknown or unfamiliar signs and (2) ambiguous signs. Both unknown and ambiguous signs may be literal or metaphorical.
- 10.4 Book two deals with literal signs in two kinds: (1) unknown literal signs like foreign words in Scripture or imperfectly translated ones in Latin; hence the Bible student must have a wide knowledge of the Scriptures and must learn the relevant languages or consult experts and to examine original versions and various translations. (2) unknown metaphorical signs requires "liberal education": knowledge of the natural world, number, music, arts and sciences which he classifies as either human institutions or divine one's which humans have developed:

Human institutions: superstitious ones--astrology  
non-superstitious ones like representational art which is superfluous and a waste of time; valuable ones like knowledge of weights and measures, alphabet, shorthand, etc.

Divinely instituted disciplines for consultation: history, sciences (medicine and astronomy), practical arts (navigation, carpentry, logic, rhetoric), and philosophy.

10.5 All these may be studied in moderation and with humble acknowledgment that knowledge puffs up, but love edifies, and that the treasure of pagan books are tiny when compared with Scripture, which Augustine compares with the wealth of Solomon (see also his famous Egyptian gold analogy).

10.6 Augustine's traditional analysis of the curriculum is perhaps the most systematic analysis of it made in antiquity. It is an interesting mixture of the practical and theoretical. He calls for a compilation or wider distribution of handbooks on Hebrew names and botanical terms in the OT. He also seems to be working out FROM THE START WHAT KINDS OF KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERTISE IS HELPFUL FOR CHRISTIANS TO ACQUIRE IN ORDER TO READ THE BIBLE AND UNDERSTAND AND COMMUNICATE IT. It is not exhaustive, since he does not treat grammar, but he would no doubt include it among the divine disciplines as mentioned above.

## 11. Book Three: Ambiguous Signs

11.1 Augustine deals with "unknown" or unfamiliar signs in Book Two; in Book Three he deals with ambiguous ones. Literal words or expressions (signs) are ambiguous on occasion if there is uncertainty regarding punctuation or pronunciation. Other words or expressions are ambiguous because it is difficult to determine if they are to be taken literally or figuratively.

To take literally what is figurative and has spiritual significance is a mark of slavery like that of the OT Jews and pagan society which confuses sign and thing.

To take spiritually what is literal is the opposite danger.

11.2 To help in deciding which expressions are literal and figurative, Augustine lays down several guidelines: (1) Cruel words in the mouth of God or a saint will refer literally to the destruction of lust; (2) wicked words or deeds by a saint are to be taken figuratively; (3) An expression that forbids wickedness or requires kindness is literal; (4) an expression which commands wickedness is figurative; (5) Yet, the reader should not take as figurative certain commands addressed to particular categories of people, or the non-condemnatory descriptions of polygamy which though wrong now were not then.

11.3 There is much that is unclear in this book; it may be the least rewarding of the four. Questions about its content arise: (1) When it comes to these ambiguous signs, are we dealing with moral precepts only, and not with descriptive phrases such as the "anger of God" or "crucifying the flesh"? (2) How do we distinguish between a moral absolute and a practice or precept justified by a particular circumstance? (3) If OT adultery and polygamy can be justified, what about murder or cruelty? (4) How can a passage be both figurative and literal (3.73) as almost everything in the OT is? (5) When examining a passage from all sides in order to find the true meaning, what do we actually do and what procedures are legitimate?

11.4 The rest of Book 3 gives ways for determining what a particular figurative word or expression means: (1) a particular word will not always have the same figurative sense; (2) Easy passages should illustrate the obscure; (3) If a meaning is reached

not intended by the human author, it is not necessarily wrong; Scripture contains many tropes.

11.5 Augustine introduces the seven rules of the Donatist exegete Tyconius in which he finds much value.

## **12. Book Four: Christian rhetoric or preaching**

12.1 This book has to do with the presentation or communication of the exegetical discoveries made on the basis of the first three books. Augustine warns his readers not to expect a rhetorical treatise of the traditional kind. This book has perhaps been the most influential.

12.2 Augustine issues a rousing appeal to believers not to shrink back from using rhetoric in defense of the faith. Rhetoric is neutral ground which Christians must occupy and employ. They do not need traditional rhetorical education and its rules, but can learn eloquence by listening to eloquent Christian speakers and imitating them. There is no lack of Christian speakers who combine wisdom and eloquence. Even ineloquent speakers can save themselves if they stick close to the text of Scripture.

12.3 Are the Scriptures eloquent as well as wise? They do have their own form of eloquence as illustrated in Paul and Amos. The speaker should not imitate the deliberately obscure parts of Scripture because in addressing a popular audience, clarity and intelligibility is required. Even rough, colloquial phrases may be used even if they offend the educated.

12.4 The importance of holding an audience's attention leads Augustine to address Cicero's doctrine the orator's three aims: to teach, to delight, and to move, or "to be listened to with understanding, with pleasure, and with obedience" (4. 87). Without getting caught up in entertainment, the Christian speaker should make these three goals his own.

12.5 They are combined with another Ciceronian triad: the eloquent speaker should speak of small things in a restrained style, moderate things in a mixed style, and important things in a grand style. But in the Scriptures all things are important! Augustine illustrates the three styles from Paul, Cyprian, and Ambrose and shows how they reflect different aims. In an address, the three styles may be combined.

12.6 The aim of giving pleasure is the least important. Also, while using any one style the speaker must be aware of all three aims: teaching, delighting, and obeying.

12.7 The last things Augustine emphasizes are these: the integrity of the teacher's life; a concern for truth rather than wrangling; whether the speaker is delivering his own sermon or some one else (which he may do), and the need to pray for words that will communicate.

12.8 Augustine draws heavily on Cicero, but not so uncritically; he treats Cicero as he sees fit. He suggests that Cicero was the embodiment, imperfect but by far the best available, of the divinely instituted forms of rhetoric (common grace!). Many things Cicero said are immovable, others to be modified. Augustine carefully sifts his rhetorical advice in light of Christian concerns as he recommends in Book Two.

12.9 Augustine blends classical and Christian conceptions and his work contains much that is valuable:

To the ordinary preacher, he has given assurance of the eloquence of the Bible, the power of prayer, the reasonableness of using borrowed material and the importance of keeping basic goals in view and appreciating the needs of an audience.

To the educated Christian, he has provided what is permanently useful in the art of rhetoric, a strong legitimation of its use, and a clear demonstration of it in Scripture and the Fathers. THAT AUGUSTINE SHOULD NOT ONLY EXPLICITLY ACCEPT BUT EMBRACE RHETORIC IS AN IMPORTANT LANDMARK IN THE HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY.

#### **IV. Final Note:**

13. DDC is not about Christian doctrine, but about the business of Christian teaching, teaching Christianity. Some (H. I. Marrou) believe that DDC is a sketch of Christian culture and a scheme for Christian education, a parallel to Newman's Idea of a Christian University. This is probably not the case.

14. Indications from Augustine's letters suggest that the book was perhaps written in response to the request of the Bishop of Carthage, an Aurelius, that Augustine compose a manual or handbook for the education and training of the clergy in their pastoral and homiletic duties. Hence, the book is not about Christian education but with education in Christianity. Hence, the title *Teaching Christianity*.