

*Dr. David Naugle
Dallas Baptist University*

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*Agapic Reading:
How to Read the Bible and Other Literature
to Enhance Love for God and Neighbor*

*"But the goal of our instruction is love. . . ."
1 Timothy 1: 5*

What is the purpose of reading? That is, what is the ultimate end or *telos* of an encounter between ourselves as human beings and literary texts? A variety of answers from various traditions could no doubt be marshalled in response to this query. St. Augustine, for example, made a very provocative suggestion regarding the final end of reading. On the biblical basis of the ultimate and penultimate commandments, the great Church father believed that the act of reading and interpreting the Scriptures must not rest contentedly at any roadside park until it arrived all the way at its final destination. In reading the Bible, he argued that we travel on a road that leads not to aesthetic pleasure, or mere knowledge, or to moral action, or even to Christian convictions, but rather to the destination of love. As he admonished readers of the Scriptures so eloquently, ". . . you should take pains to turn over and over in your mind what you read, until your interpretation of it is led right through to the kingdom of charity."¹ To love God and one's neighbor is the essence of the Scriptures, and thus the task of interpreting them must be pursued in order that the love of God and others is realized. Thus, reading the Bible, according to St. Augustine, must be dominated by an agapic *telos*.

¹ Augustine, *Teaching Christianity (De Doctrina Christiana)*, intro., trans., and notes Edmund Hill, O. P. *The Works of St. Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, ed. John E. Rotelle, O. S. A., vol. 11 (Hyde Park, New York: New City Press, 1996), 3.15.23.

Given the contemporary commotion that governs literary and critical theory regarding the ins and outs of the reading process, and in light of this ancient but provocative Augustinian thesis, the purpose of this paper is to reflect upon St. Augustine's conception of "agapic reading" or his hermeneutic "principle of charity" especially as he presented it in his magisterial *De Doctrina Christiana* (*DDC = On Christian Doctrine/Teaching*). On the basis of this conception, our goal will be to investigate how we might (re)learn how to read the Bible, as well as other literature, in order to enhance love for God and our neighbors.

Reading played a significant role in Augustine's own life and education, especially as he has recounted it for us in his *Confessions*.² Indeed, as he put it, "I was sent to school to learn to read."³ His search for wisdom was launched by the reading Cicero's *Hortensius*, included a disappointing first encounter with the text of Scripture, and culminated in his response to the voice of a child, as if it were the command of God, to "Take up and read; take up and read."⁴ At this prompt, his chance selection of a text by the Apostle Paul in Romans 13: 13-14 was the key that opened the door of faith for him. As Augustine himself put it, "No further would I read; nor needed I: for instantly at the end of that sentence, by a light as it were of serenity infused into my heart, all the darkness of doubt vanished away."⁵ Augustine thus came to believe that the Holy Scriptures contained the true philosophy, and at long last, his own unhappy mind and heart had come

² Brian Stock, *Augustine the Reader: Meditation, Self-Knowledge, and the Ethics of Interpretation* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 3, believes that "the best narrative account of the role of reading in his [Augustine's] education remains books 1-9 of the *Confessions*. . . ."

³ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. and intro. R. S. Pine-Coffin (New York/London: Penguin Books, 1961), 1.9 (p. 30).

⁴ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans Edward B. Pusey, 8.12.29.

⁵ *Ibid.*

to find its rest, not in the books of the *Artes Liberales*, but rather in “the solid, intractable mass of the Christian Bible.”⁶ No wonder, then, that the act and art of reading was of primary importance to St. Augustine throughout his life and career.

Some nine years after his conversion, at the request of Aurelius, the bishop of Carthage, Augustine as the newly appointed bishop of Hippo began work in the mid 390s on a treatise on education in Christianity for young clergymen. The result was his famous *De Doctrina Christiana* whose scope includes the entire Christian community as a body of readers, either as clergy or educated laypersons, teaching them how to read the Bible rightly, and how to communicate it effectively to others.⁷ But even the interpretation and communication of the words of Scripture by layman or clergyman are not ends in themselves. Augustine is concerned in *De Doctrina Christiana* to transcend mere reading proficiency and rhetorical prowess to focus on the ultimate goal of these activities which is nothing other than love. Indeed, in its four books, Augustine lays out the ontology and priority of love in book one, provides instruction on how to interpret the biblical text which is revelatory of love in books two and three, and concludes in book four with a discourse on how to proclaim the truth in love so that more people can discover what constitutes

⁶ Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (New York: Dorset Press, 1967), 262.

⁷ Henri-Irene Marrou, *Saint Augustine et la fin de la culture antique*, 4th ed. (Paris, 1958), quoted in Stock, *Augustine the Reader*, 191. Indeed, as Stock points out, many believe that *DDC* is one of Augustine’s most original works, a truly distinguished intellectual achievement in which he lays out the theoretical foundations for a reading culture. As the iconographic tradition indicates, Augustine along with Jerome are depicted as the twin fathers of Western book culture, a distinction which even contemporary theorists confirm (e.g., Paul Ricoeur and Hans Georg Gadamer). Stock also suggests that while *DDC* focuses specifically on instruction for future clergymen and is not a treatise on Christian culture or education, still this book makes room for these matters in its main purpose.

their highest good and true happiness in the love of God. In *DDC*, charity is clearly the touchstone in the reading and preaching of Scripture.

Augustine arrives at this central conviction in a fascinating and rather complex way, and it turns on his theory of signs, or what today we call “semiotics.” According to Augustine, the introduction of sin into the world brought about a radical change in the divine-human relationship, for it resulted in “a fall from direct knowledge into indirect knowledge through signs.”⁸ Though in a fallen world, God might be mystically discerned in glimpses of direct awareness, such experiences were quite rare and exceptionally fleeting. Something clear and distinct was needed to remedy this unfortunate epistemic situation, and for Augustine, the solution was to be found in the Scriptures. The chasm of sin and darkness which separated God from direct human consciousness had been graciously bridged through the Bible as the repository of divine revelation ensconced in human words. As Augustine put it succinctly, “For the meantime, let the Scriptures be the countenance of God.”⁹ But as important as the Bible was for Augustine, he believed it to be only a textual means to a spiritual end. To understand Augustine’s basis for the agapic reading of the Scriptures in greater depth, we must examine his theory of signs and things just a bit more closely.

Augustine champions what might profitably be called an “instrumental” or “referential” view of signs and words. At the outset of the first book of *DDC*, Augustine writes: “All teaching is either about things or signs; *but things*,” he says, “*are learned about through signs*.”¹⁰ Some things are just things in the strictest sense of the word, but other things can also be used for the purpose of signification (e. g., wood, stone, animal).

⁸ Brown, Augustine, 261.

⁹ Augustine, *Sermon 22. 7*; quoted in Brown, *Augustine*, 262.

¹⁰ Augustine, *Teaching Christianity*, 1.2.2 (emphasis added).

Furthermore, there are yet other things such as signs or words which are *only* used for the purpose of signification. “Nobody, after all,” says Augustine, “uses words except for the sake of signifying something.” From this discussion, Augustine makes it quite plain what he means by signs, namely “those things . . . which are used in order to signify something else. Thus every sign is also a thing, because if it is not a thing at all it is simply nothing. But not every single thing is also a sign.”¹¹ Thus, for Augustine, signs embodied in words are instruments of signification. As means of reference, signs are always inferior to the thing that they represent. What really counts are the truth and meaning that are communicated through the instrumentality of signs.

Signs are indeed a specie of things, and thus Augustine proceeds to an discussion about “things,” reserving further scrutiny of “signs” to the second and third books of *DDC*. What is upper most in Augustine’s mind in the remainder of book one is an intense look at which things (including signs) are to “enjoyed,” and which things are to be “used.” In introducing this topic, he writes, “So then, there are some things which are meant to be enjoyed, others which are meant to be used, yet others [human beings] which do both the enjoying and the using.”¹² Human happiness itself depends on this careful distinction between things to be enjoyed and used. Thus he continues: “Things that are to be enjoyed make us happy; things which are to be used help us on our way to happiness, providing us, so to say, with crutches and props for reaching the things that will make us happy, and enabling us to keep them.”¹³ But what exactly does he mean by this distinction between enjoyment and use? “To enjoy something,” he avers, “is to hold fast to it in love for its own sake. To use something is to apply whatever it may be to the

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 1.3.3.

¹³ Ibid.

purpose of obtaining what you love—if indeed it is something that ought to be loved.”¹⁴ Things to be enjoyed have an intrinsic value and are worthy of our love. Things to be used have an extrinsic value, and must be employed only as a means of possessing what one loves.

Hence, in assembling these ideas, we conclude that for Augustine the things to be enjoyed should be loved for their own sake as intrinsic goods, and are the source of human happiness. Things to be used, on the other hand, must be employed as means to obtaining what we love for its own sake, and are the servants of human happiness. Now in the subsequent discussion, Augustine makes it patently clear that one thing and one thing only is to be enjoyed, and that is God: “The things that are to be enjoyed are the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, in fact the Trinity, one supreme thing, and one which is shared in common by all who enjoy it.”¹⁵ Everything else is to be loved or used for the sake of the enjoyment of God: “Among all the things there are, therefore, those alone are to be enjoyed which we have noted as being eternal and unchanging, *while the rest are to be used, in order that we may come at last to the enjoyment of the former sort.*”¹⁶

Now the upshot of all of this for present purposes is this: for Augustine the Bible as a book of linguistic signs must be seen as a set of things that are not to be loved or enjoyed for their own sake, but rather used as a means to the end of knowing and thereby enjoying and loving God. Biblical signs and words are servants of our true happiness which is found exclusively in the eternal, unchanging divine Trinity. Thus the Scriptures themselves are subordinated to an ontology of love which clearly specifies

¹⁴ Saint Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, trans., intro., notes R. P. H. Green, The World’s Classics (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 1.4.4.

¹⁵ Augustine, *Teaching Christianity*, 1.5.5.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.22.20.

which things are to be enjoyed and which are to be used. Biblical signs are things to be used, and it is the being of God alone which is signified by those signs that is to be enjoyed. This love, as Augustine understands it, constitutes the fulfillment of the law and is the *telos* of reading the divine scriptures.

The chief purpose of all that we have been saying in our discussion of things is to make it understood that the fulfillment and end of the law [cf. Rom. 13: 10; 1 Tim. 1: 5] and all the divine scriptures is to love the thing which must be enjoyed [God] and the thing which together with us can enjoy that thing (since there is no need for a commandment to love oneself).¹⁷

Indeed, as Augustine continues, all things with the exception of God but including the Bible, are to be loved only in the way that we might love a car because it takes us to our destination. It is only because of the value of the end that we develop an appropriate, but limited appreciation for the means that gets us there. Everything God has created must be used as transportation to the destination of love.

To enlighten us and enable us, the whole temporal dispensation [including the provision of the Scriptures] was set up by divine providence for our salvation. We must make use of this, not with a permanent love and enjoyment of it, but with a transient love and enjoyment of our journey, or of our conveyances, so to speak, or any other expedients whatsoever . . . , so that we love the means of transport only because of our destination.¹⁸

Love for God, therefore, and a love for those who share in this love of God becomes the only legitimate goal in reading the Bible. This is Augustine's famous "principle of charity," or what I am calling "agapic reading." Indeed, Augustine makes this kind of reading the final hermeneutical test, for if one's interpretation of the text does not enhance love for God and our neighbor, then one has not read the Scriptures rightly. "So anyone," Augustine asserts, "who thinks that he has understood the divine scriptures or any part of them, but cannot by his understanding build up this double love of God and

¹⁷ Saint Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, 1.35.39.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

neighbor, has not yet succeeded in understanding them.”¹⁹ Indeed, he goes so far as to suggest that an incorrect reading of the biblical text that nonetheless leads to a cultivation of this love is not as serious as we might suspect. Despite the misinterpretation, one may still arrive at the proper destination (love), even though the way of getting there was fallacious (the misreading). Still it is best that the reader discover the proper means (correct interpretation) to the proper end lest this practice in the long run eventually prove to be spiritually misleading if not destructive.

Anyone who derives from them an idea which is useful for supporting this love but fails to say what the writer demonstrably meant in the passage has not made a fatal error, and is certainly not a liar. . . . If. . . he is misled by an idea of the kind that builds up love, which is the end of the commandment, he is misled in the same way as a walker who leaves his path by mistake but reaches the destination to which the path leads by going through a field. But he must be put right and shown how it is more useful not to leave the path, in case the habit of deviating should force him to go astray or even adrift.²⁰

Though a lost traveler may arrive at her destination by a circuitous path, still it is better to get there by an accurate reading of the map. Analogously, how much better it is, according to Augustine, to reach the goal of agapic reading by the right interpretive path than to get there accidentally. Nonetheless, the important factor for Augustine is this: “The major object of enjoyment and love is the Trinity—not the text,” else one succumb to what might be called “a semiotics of idolatry.”²¹

How different this is from contemporary reading theories which venerate signs, especially in the thinking of Jacques Derrida. He remains unconvinced that human beings can access reality linguistically, or that knowledge of a prelinguistic,

¹⁹ Ibid. 1.36.40.

²⁰ Ibid.1.41.36.

²¹ Susan A. Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1982).

preconceptual world is even possible. If there is no accessible center, or if there is a total absence of “God, the Idea, the World Spirit, the Self, substance, matter and so on,” then everything is language and the free play of interpretation. According to Derrida, we are not invited to look through the text to something else, but rather only at it. He writes:

Reading . . . cannot legitimately transgress the text toward something other than it, toward the referent (a reality that is metaphysical, historical, psychobiographical, etc.) or toward a signifier outside the text whose content could take place, could have taken place outside of language, that is to say, in the sense that we give to that word, outside of writing in general. . . . There is nothing outside of the text.²²

Whereas for Augustine the sign is always subordinated to the thing it signifies, for Derrida, the thing signified is always subordinated, indeed even eliminated, in relation to the sign. An interesting comparison to make in this regard is with a Rabbinic conception of signification which combines a necessary adherence to both the sign and to the thing signified. To dismiss the sign as Augustine has done, or to idolize it as Derrida has done is misplaced according to Jewish thinking. Susan Handelman explains.

Jews adhere to signs not because they take the sign for the thing as *res* in the Greek philosophical sense, but because there is no primal division between word and thing in Jewish thought, and no conception of reality in terms of Greek

²² Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 158. If language is incapable of the mimetic representation of a final truth or reality and exists as a self-referential system, then it is arbitrary. The meaning of terms is a function of the place they assume in a linguistic system. There is a free play of possibilities on such a linguistic field where few if any boundaries delimit the kinds of meanings or interpretations readers may find in or attribute to texts. According to Derrida, since words lack fixed or concrete definitions such that “meaning” only surfaces in the way that words *differ* from one another in the dynamics of the language system, then the possibility of any final signification or interpretation must be endlessly *deferred*. Stanley Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1996), 143, explains the background of Derrida’s play on these words. “The French noun *differance* is Derrida’s own coinage. Its etymological root lies in the verb *differer*, which means both ‘to differ’ and ‘to defer.’ *Differance* sounds exactly like *difference*. But by appending the *ance*- ending, which in French produces verbal nouns, Derrida constructs a new form that means literally both ‘differing’ and ‘deferring.’”

metaphysics, or of truth as a totally self-identical present being. Jews adhere to signs because reality innately is constituted as linguistic for them. For the Jew it is precisely this cancellation of the sign or word for thing that is idolatrous.²³

In addition to these interesting musings on the nature of signs and signification, a question worth investigating, especially for avid Christian readers of all kinds of texts, is whether or not Augustine's principle of charity can be extended from the Bible to include other types of literary genres as well? Can poetry, short stories, novels, essays, biography and so on also be read agapically with a view to enhancing love for God and neighbor? I think that it is quite possible to transfer Augustine's insights, in particular his principle of charity, to the entire spectrum of the reading experience for the thoughtful Christian. So does David L. Jeffrey. He believes that the momentum of Augustine's literary theories are such "as to carry the energies of textual study outward into the whole realm of human inquiry, the *universitas* of humane wisdom, but only to draw their comprehension back again into concrete enactment of the word and will of God as summarized in the Great Commandment."²⁴

Perhaps, then, a comprehensive agapic reading is possible, but only on the basis of at least two theological assumptions. The first is a sacramental conception of the sum-total of reality and human life. This is established upon the pervasive and profound implications of the fact that "God the Father Almighty" is indeed the "Maker of heaven and earth" (Apostles' Creed). Average denizens of our contemporary modern or postmodern age tend to view ordinary existence and every day human experience within

²³ Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses*, 117. Handelman points out that what amounts to an Augustinian articulation of "the displacement and escape from from textuality that permeates Christian thought" would be unthinkable in the Rabbinic tradition. According to Augustine, the Jews adhere to the sign (words) rather than to the thing which the words signify. But according to Handelman, true Jewish idolatry would be the attempt to adhere to the thing apart from signs (words).

²⁴ Jeffrey, *People of the Book*, 89.

a naturalistic framework, that is, in the context of a *Weltanschauung* in which all things have been thoroughly demythologized and disenchanting. Things are otherwise for theists whose spiritual sensitivities enable them to recognize the universe as the divine handiwork that is “charged with the grandeur of God” (Gerard Manley Hopkins). Such a sacramental view of reality means that this world is seen as “the visible sign of an invisible reality, a world thoroughly impregnated with the energy, purpose, and love of its Creator, who dwells in it as He dwells in the bread and wine on the altar.”²⁵ In such a context, as Thomas Howard has pointed out, “ordinariness . . . opens out onto mystery.”²⁶ And ordinariness, or mystery in disguise, is the stuff of which literature consists. The cleverly devised plot and carefully crafted characters of a novel, the multitudinous themes of poetry, the abstruse subjects of academic essays, and the fascinating, tragicomic lives depicted in biography all embody a sacramental reality whether the authors and readers of such texts realize it or not. Literature, in other words, is suffused with the holy, and is a silent praise to God who made all things well. Thus before one can read agapically, one must first learn to read *sacramentally* by becoming aware that the content encountered in literary texts is the bearer of transcendence. In this sense, there is no such thing as non-religious literature.

The second assumption establishing a foundation for universal agapic reading is found in the recognition that despite the pervasiveness and perversion of sin, the

²⁵ W. T. Jones, *A History of Western Philosophy*, 2d ed., vol. 2, *The Medieval Mind* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1969), xix.

²⁶ Thomas Howard, *Hallowed Be This House* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1976, 1979), 15. Howard has also bemoaned the fact of the disenchantment of the world in these terms: “The ‘secularization’ of life urged on us by science and commerce and modernity generally is surely one of the bleakest myths ever to settle down over men’s imaginations” (13). Thus for this reason, he says “it is hard to see ourselves as walking daily among the hallows—that is, as carrying on the commonplace routines of our ordinary life in the presence of mighty mysteries that would ravish and terrify us if this veil of ordinariness were suddenly stripped away” (9).

goodness of God's creation endures, and is manifested in any and all circumstances. Nothing is totally evil or can be totally corrupted by evil. If it could, it would not exist, for evil is not a thing, but a lack in and corruption of things. Indeed, evil is a parasite which attaches itself to something originally good. Only because of the continued existence of the essentially good host does the parasite of evil exist at all. Thus even in the most despicable of situations, something of the original creation continues and is evident to the perceptive observer. Albert Wolters has expressed this thesis as clearly and succinctly as anyone.

The central point to make is that, biblically speaking, sin neither abolishes nor becomes identified with creation. Creation and sin remain distinct, however closely they may be intertwined in our experience. Prostitution does not eliminate the goodness of sexuality; political tyranny cannot wipe out the divinely ordained character of the state; the anarchy and subjectivism of much of modern art cannot obliterate the creational legitimacy of art itself. In short, evil does not have the power of bringing to naught God's steadfast faithfulness to the works of his hands.²⁷

Thus in literature that embodies dubious content, including such things as inveterate pride, heartless envy, unquenchable anger, chronic laziness, unrestrained greed, uncontrolled gluttony, and inordinate lust, there is an underlying expression of a good, sacramental order that has been deeply disrupted by radical rebellion and disobedience. Literary texts depict the structures of God's good creation that have been woefully misdirected by human intransigence. Sin caricatures creation, but is absolutely incapable of destroying it. Because the havoc which sin reeks upon creation is always kept in check by the providence and laws of God, it is possible when evil, distortion, and corruption are encountered in the reading process to observe and appreciate aspects of the divine, sacramental order that are surreptitiously manifested amidst the chaos. As Augustine himself said in his *Confessions*, "All who desert you and set themselves up

²⁷ Albert Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985), 47.

against you merely copy you in a perverse way; but by this very act of imitation they only show that you are the Creator of all nature and, consequently, that there is no place whatever where man may hide away from you.”²⁸ Thus before one can read agapically, one must also learn to read *providentially* by recognizing that because of the power of God, sin is unable to destroy His handiwork, and that glimmers of Himself and the goodness of creation are everywhere evident in texts despite the presence of evil.

Thus in attempting to read various types of literature agapically, we would do well to ask ourselves the following questions in light of the preceding considerations: (1) What aspects of the divine, sacramental reality are on display in this particular text we are reading? (2) How has human sin and disobedience misdirected and perverted this aspect of God’s handiwork? (3) In what ways are aspects of the original goodness of God’s creation still evident despite the corruption present in this situation? (4) In what ways could this aspect of life and reality be redeemed and redirected for God’s glory and human benefit? (5) How can what I have met and detected in this particular text sacramentally and providentially be transformed into an increase in love for God as well as our neighbors? If indeed we can master the prerequisites of reading both sacramentally and providentially, then hopefully we can find success in discovering how to read all texts—biblically and otherwise—agapically. Perhaps it is the highest purpose of reading for a Christian. And it may be one of the most effective ways to be about the business of integrating Christian faith and learning.

Sola Deo Gloria

²⁸ Augustine, *Confessions*, R. S. Pine-Coffin, 2. 6. (p. 50).

*Dr. David Naugle
Dallas Baptist University*

Friday Symposium

*Agapic Reading:
How to Read the Bible and Other Literature
to Enhance Love for God and Neighbor*

*“But the goal of our instruction is love. . . .”
1 Timothy 1: 5*

What is the purpose of reading? That is, what is the ultimate end or *telos* of an encounter between ourselves as human beings and literary texts? A variety of answers from various traditions could be marshalled in response to this query. Drawing upon the famous Ciceronian formula which specifies the triadic function of eloquence (that is, to teach, to delight, and to persuade), we might suggest that we read (1) to acquire knowledge, (2) to experience enjoyment, and (3) to establish beliefs. In other words, reading is motivated by cognitive, aesthetic, and doxastic purposes. All of these make good sense, and no doubt others could be easily added to this list. For example, writers and theoreticians standing in the mainstream of the Christian literary tradition in the West have seen “ethical compunction” as an inescapable component to the composition and reading of texts. Thus we have Dante’s test of civic virtue, Wyclif’s probing of the will of the reader, and Sidney’s argument for the essence of poetry as moral action.²⁹ Furthermore, in our own postmodern day, especially under the influence of contemporary views of textuality and literary theories like reader response criticism, there would seem to be as many purposes for reading as there are readers and texts to be read. A response to the question about the purpose of reading, then, will no doubt depend upon the tradition in which one stands—Ciceronian, Christian, postmodern, or otherwise.

²⁹ David Lyle Jeffrey, *People of the Book: Christian Identity and Literary Culture* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 11.

St. Augustine would recognize value in some of the above purposes for reading, disagree with others, and would no doubt add another and, ostensibly, comprehensive goal, especially when it comes to the text of sacred Scripture, namely reading for the sake of love. On the biblical basis of the ultimate and penultimate commandments requiring love for God and neighbor, the great Church father believed that the act of reading and interpreting the Scriptures must not rest contentedly at any roadside park until it arrived all the way at its final destination. In reading the Bible, he argued that we travel on a road that leads not to aesthetic pleasure, or mere knowledge, or to moral action, or even to Christian convictions, but rather to the destination of love. As he admonished readers of the Scriptures so eloquently, “. . . you should take pains to turn over and over in your mind what you read, until your interpretation of it is led right through to the kingdom of charity.”³⁰ To love God and one’s neighbor is the essence of the Scriptures, and thus the task of interpreting them must be pursued in order that the love of God and others is realized. Thus, reading the Bible, according to St. Augustine, must be dominated by an agapic *telos*.

Given the contemporary commotion that governs literary and critical theory regarding the ins and outs of the reading process, and in light of this ancient but provocative Augustinian thesis, the purpose of this paper is to reflect upon St. Augustine’s conception of “agapic reading” or his “principle of charity” especially as he presented it in his magisterial *De Doctrina Christiana* (*DDC* = *On Christian Doctrine/Teaching*). On the basis of this conception, our goal will be to investigate how

³⁰ Augustine, *Teaching Christianity (De Doctrina Christiana)*, intro., trans., and notes Edmund Hill, O. P. *The Works of St. Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, ed. John E. Rotelle, O. S. A., vol. 11 (Hyde Park, New York: New City Press, 1996), 3.15.23.

we might (re)learn how to read the Bible, as well as other literature in order to enhance love for God and our neighbors.

We would do well to begin with a cursory survey of Augustine's own experience of reading, especially in the context of his early education as he has recounted it for us in his *Confessions*.³¹ In preparing for a profession as a teacher of rhetoric, Augustine, like other educated men of the Roman empire, was trained in the literary and cultural tradition of Cicero and Quintilian. Having been sent off to school at Carthage, he pursued the usual course of rhetorical study and read the typical books on eloquence. In his nineteenth year, however, he encountered Cicero's encomium on wisdom in his book *Hortensius* (now lost) which, as he put it, "altered my affections, and turned my prayers to Thyself, O Lord; and made me have other purposes and desires."³² From that point onward, Augustine resolutely committed himself to the intellectual life, and thusly to the pursuit of wisdom. Reading would be central to his intellectual vocation, and to his personal quest for the *summum bonum* or human life's greatest good. Consequently, under the Christian influence of his mother Monica and her identification of Christ and wisdom, he immediately began to read the Scriptures, but was quickly disappointed in his encounter with the text: "To me," he later recalled, "they seemed quite unworthy of comparison with the stately prose of Cicero."³³ Hence he turned away from his mother's religion, and for over a decade sojourned spiritually and philosophically in the lands of the

³¹ Brian Stock, *Augustine the Reader: Meditation, Self-Knowledge, and the Ethics of Interpretation* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 3, believes that "the best narrative account of the role of reading in his [Augustine's] education remains books 1-9 of the *Confessions*. . . ."

³² Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Edward B. Pusey, in *The Great Books of the Western World*, ed. John Maynard Hutchins, vol. 18 (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1952), 3.4.7

³³ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. and intro. R. S. Pine-Coffin, Penguin Classics (New York: Penguin Books, 1961), 3.5.9.

Manicheans and the Skeptics. In due course he became an established professor of rhetoric in the city of Milan where he learned from St. Ambrose, the local bishop and an accomplished rhetorician in his own right, how to read the Scriptures afresh, this time not flat-footedly in a literal or wooden way, but spiritually and symbolically, reaching down to the deepest levels of their meaning. With an assist from his recently embraced neo-Platonic philosophy, he was eventually converted to Christ (baptized Easter, 387), and began a lifelong study of the Bible, “bringing to it and exploiting to the full all the literary arts that he had acquired from his early education.”³⁴ Behold, then, the power of reading in Augustine’s life. His search for wisdom was launched by the reading Cicero’s *Hortensius*, and it culminated in his response to the voice of a child, as if it were the command of God, to “Take up and read; take up and read.”³⁵ His chance selection of a text by the Apostle Paul in Romans 13: 13-14 was the key that opened the door of faith for him. As Augustine himself put it, “No further would I read; nor needed I: for instantly at the end of that sentence, by a light as it were of serenity infused into my heart, all the darkness of doubt vanished away.”³⁶ Augustine thus came to believe that the Holy Scriptures contained the true philosophy, and at long last, his own unhappy mind and heart had come to find its rest, not in the books of the *Artes Liberales*, but rather in “the solid, intractable mass of the Christian Bible.”³⁷ No wonder, then, that the act and art of reading was of primary importance to St. Augustine throughout his life and career.

³⁴ Otto A. Bird, *Cultures in Conflict: An Essay in the Philosophy of the Humanities* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976), 26.

³⁵ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans Edward B. Pusey, 8.12.29.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (New York: Dorset Press, 1967), 262.

Some nine years after his conversion, at the request of Aurelius, the bishop of Carthage, Augustine as the newly appointed bishop of Hippo began work in the mid 390s on a treatise on education in Christianity for young clergymen. The result was his famous *De Doctrina Christiana*, wrongly conceived as the “fundamental charter of Christian culture,” or as a “program of education for Christian intellectuals,” but rightly conceived as a manual of instruction in hermeneutics and homiletics for future Christian preachers.³⁸ Nonetheless, this work’s scope includes the entire Christian community as a body of readers, either as clergy or educated laypersons, teaching them how to read the Bible rightly, and how to communicate it effectively to others. But even the interpretation and communication of the words of Scripture by layman or clergyman are not ends in themselves. Augustine is concerned in *De Doctrina Christiana* to transcend mere reading proficiency and rhetorical prowess to focus on the ultimate goal of these activities which is nothing other than love. Indeed, in its four books, Augustine lays out the ontology and priority of love in book one, provides instruction on how to interpret the biblical text which is revelatory of love in books two and three, and concludes in book four with a discourse on how to proclaim the truth in love so more people can discover what constitutes their highest good and true happiness in the love of God. In *DDC*, charity is clearly the touchstone in the reading and preaching of Scripture.

³⁸ Henri-Irenee Marrou, *Saint Augustine et la fin de la culture antique*, 4th ed. (Paris, 1958), quoted in Stock, *Augustine the Reader*, 191. Indeed, as Stock points out, many believe that *DDC* is one of Augustine’s most original works, a truly distinguished intellectual achievement in which he lays out the theoretical foundations for a reading culture. As the iconographic tradition indicates, Augustine along with Jerome are depicted as the twin fathers of Western book culture, a distinction which even contemporary theorists confirm (e.g., Paul Ricoeur and Hans Georg Gadamer). Stock also suggests that while *DDC* focuses specifically on instruction for future clergymen and is not a treatise on Christian culture or education, still this book makes room for these matters in its main purpose.

Augustine arrives at this central conviction in a fascinating and rather complex way, and it turns on his theory of signs, or what today we call “semiotics.” For Augustine, the created world is simply God’s “dumb show,” a divine, but silent oration that nonetheless communicates to us the glory of God (cf. Psa. 19).³⁹ What really interests him in a far greater way, however, are words—spoken and written words—the very speech of God inscripturated in a book, “an eloquence, teaching salvation, perfectly adjusted to stir the hearts of all learners.”⁴⁰ But originally in creation such a written form of communication was not intended or necessary. God spoke face to face with the primeval human couple, and knowledge of God was possible without any form of mediation. However, the introduction of sin into the world brought about a radical change in the divine-human relationship, for it resulted in “a fall from direct knowledge into indirect knowledge through signs.”⁴¹ Though in a fallen world, God might be mystically discerned in glimpses of direct awareness, such experiences were quite rare and exceptionally fleeting. Something clear and distinct was needed to remedy this unfortunate epistemic situation, and for Augustine, the solution was to be found in the Scriptures. The chasm of sin and darkness which separated God from direct human consciousness had been graciously bridged through the Bible as the repository of divine revelation ensconced in human words. As Augustine put it succinctly, “For the meantime, let the Scriptures be the countenance of God.”⁴² But as important as the Bible was for Augustine, he believed it to be only a textual means to a spiritual end. To understand

³⁹ Augustine, *An Exposition of the Psalms* 103. 1; quoted in Brown, *Augustine*, 259.

⁴⁰ Augustine, *Letters of Augustine* 55.7.13; quoted in Brown, *Augustine*, 259.

⁴¹ Brown, *Augustine*, 261.

⁴² Augustine, *Sermon* 22. 7; quoted in Brown, *Augustine*, 262.

Augustine's basis for the agapic reading of the Scriptures in greater depth, we must examine his theory of signs and things just a bit more closely.

Augustine champions what might profitably be called an "instrumental" or "referential" view of signs and words. At the outset of the first book of *DDC*, Augustine writes: "All teaching is either about things or signs; *but things*," he says, "*are learned about through signs*."⁴³ Some things are just things in the strictest sense of the word, but other things can also be used for the purpose of signification (e. g., wood, stone, animal). Furthermore, there are yet other things such as signs or words which are *only* used for the purpose of signification. "Nobody, after all," says Augustine, "uses words except for the sake of signifying something." From this discussion, Augustine makes it quite plain what he means by signs, namely "those things . . . which are used in order to signify something else. Thus every sign is also a thing, because if it is not a thing at all it is simply nothing. But not every single thing is also a sign."⁴⁴ Thus, for Augustine, signs embodied in words are instruments of signification. As means of reference, signs are always inferior to the thing that they represent. What really counts are the truth and meaning that are communicated through the instrumentality of signs.

Signs are indeed a specie of things, and thus Augustine proceeds to an discussion about "things," reserving further scrutiny of "signs" to the second and third books of *DDC*. What is upper most in Augustine's mind in the remainder of book one is an intense look at which things (including signs) are to "enjoyed," and which things are to be "used." In introducing this topic, he writes, "So then, there are some things which are meant to be enjoyed, others which are meant to be used, yet others [human beings] which do both the enjoying and the using."⁴⁵ Human happiness itself depends on this careful distinction

⁴³ Augustine, *Teaching Christianity*, 1.2.2 (emphasis added).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

between things to be enjoyed and used. Thus he continues: “Things that are to be enjoyed make us happy; things which are to be used help us on our way to happiness, providing us, so to say, with crutches and props for reaching the things that will make us happy, and enabling us to keep them.”⁴⁶ But what exactly does he mean by this distinction between enjoyment and use? “To enjoy something,” he avers, “is to hold fast to it in love for its own sake. To use something is to apply whatever it may be to the purpose of obtaining what you love—if indeed it is something that ought to be loved.”⁴⁷ Things to be enjoyed have an intrinsic value and are worthy of our love. Things to be used have an extrinsic value, and must be employed only as a means of possessing what one loves.

Hence, in assembling these ideas, we conclude that for Augustine the things to be enjoyed should be loved for their own sake as intrinsic goods, and are the source of human happiness. Things to be used, on the other hand, must be employed as means to obtaining what we love for its own sake, and are the servants of human happiness. Now in the subsequent discussion, Augustine makes it patently clear that one thing and one thing only is to be enjoyed, and that is God: “The things that are to be enjoyed are the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, in fact the Trinity, one supreme thing, and one which is shared in common by all who enjoy it.”⁴⁸ Everything else is to be loved or used for the sake of the enjoyment of God: “Among all the things there are, therefore, those alone are to be enjoyed which we have noted as being eternal and unchanging, *while the*

⁴⁵ Ibid., 1.3.3.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Saint Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, trans., intro., notes R. P. H. Green, *The World's Classics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 1.4.4.

⁴⁸ Augustine, *Teaching Christianity*, 1.5.5.

rest are to be used, in order that we may come at last to the enjoyment of the former sort."⁴⁹

Now the upshot of all of this for present purposes is this: for Augustine the Bible as a book of linguistic signs must be seen as a set of things that are not to be loved or enjoyed for their own sake, but rather used as a means to the end of knowing and thereby enjoying and loving God. Biblical signs and words are servants of our true happiness which is found exclusively in the eternal, unchanging divine Trinity. Thus the Scriptures themselves are subordinated to an ontology of love which clearly specifies which things are to be enjoyed and which are to be used. Biblical signs are things to be used, and it is the being of God alone which is signified by those signs that is to be enjoyed. This love, as Augustine understands it, constitutes the fulfillment of the law and is the *telos* of reading the divine scriptures.

The chief purpose of all that we have been saying in our discussion of things is to make it understood that the fulfillment and end of the law [cf. Rom. 13: 10; 1 Tim. 1: 5] and all the divine scriptures is to love the thing which must be enjoyed [God] and the thing which together with us can enjoy that thing (since there is no need for a commandment to love oneself).⁵⁰

Indeed, as Augustine continues, all things with the exception of God but including the Bible, are to be loved only in the way that we might love a car because it takes us to our destination. It is only because of the immense value of the end that we develop an appropriate, but limited appreciation for the means that gets us there. Everything God has created must be used as transportation to the destination of love.

To enlighten us and enable us, the whole temporal dispensation [including the provision of the Scriptures] was set up by divine providence for our salvation. We must make use of this, not with a permanent love and enjoyment of it, but with a transient love and enjoyment of our journey, or of our conveyances, so to speak,

⁴⁹ Ibid., 1.22.20.

⁵⁰ Saint Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, 1.35.39.

or any other expedients whatsoever . . . , so that we love the means of transport only because of our destination.⁵¹

Love for God, therefore, and a love for those who share in this love of God becomes the only legitimate goal in reading the Bible. This is Augustine's famous "principle of charity," or what I am calling "agapic reading." Indeed, Augustine makes this kind of reading the final hermeneutical test, for if one's interpretation of the text does not enhance love for God and our neighbor, then one has not read the Scriptures rightly. "So anyone," Augustine asserts, "who thinks that he has understood the divine scriptures or any part of them, but cannot by his understanding build up this double love of God and neighbor, has not yet succeeded in understanding them."⁵² Indeed, he goes so far as to suggest that an incorrect reading of the biblical text that nonetheless leads to a cultivation of this love is not as serious as we might suspect. Despite the misinterpretation, one may still arrive at the proper destination (love), even though the way of getting there was fallacious (the misreading). Still it is best that the reader discover the proper means (correct interpretation) to the proper end lest this practice in the long run eventually prove to be spiritually misleading if not destructive.

Anyone who derives from them an idea which is useful for supporting this love but fails to say what the writer demonstrably meant in the passage has not made a fatal error, and is certainly not a liar. . . . If. . . he is misled by an idea of the kind that builds up love, which is the end of the commandment, he is misled in the same way as a walker who leaves his path by mistake but reaches the destination to which the path leads by going through a field. But he must be put right and shown how it is more useful not to leave the path, in case the habit of deviating should force him to go astray or even adrift.⁵³

Though a lost traveler may arrive at her destination by a circuitous path, still it is better to get there by an accurate reading of the map. Analogously, how much better it is,

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid. 1.36.40.

⁵³ Ibid.1.41.36.

according to Augustine, to reach the goal of agapic reading by the right interpretive path than to get there accidentally. Because he places a such premium on exegetical accuracy, Augustine proceeds to provide the needed hermeneutical guidance in books two and three of *DDC* where he discusses the interpretation of ambiguous and unknown signs respectively. For him, there should be no substitute for a careful and accurate reading of the sacred text.

How then can we summarize these rather technical aspects of Augustine's thesis? First of all, he defines a "sign" (word) as a thing which stands for or signifies something else. Truth and meaning are signified through the instrumentality of signs (words). Secondly, Augustine examines "things," and he makes an important distinction between things which are to be enjoyed, and things which are to be used. Things to be enjoyed are the source of our happiness and are to be loved for their own sake, and the things to be used should assist us in our quest for happiness and loved only as a means to the end of happiness. Third, Augustine argues that God is the only thing to be enjoyed for its own sake, and is the source of our happiness, whereas the signs or words of Scripture are things to be used and loved only as a means to this spiritual end. To love the signs or words of Scripture as an end in themselves or for their own sake would be to invert the proper order of love. Hence, Augustine believes that the Bible itself is the means to the ultimate end of loving God and those who love Him as well. Indeed, only when a reading of the Scriptures leads to the fulfillment of the Greatest Commandment have they been interpreted rightly. Even misreadings of the Bible that fostered love were not particularly pernicious since the agapic end was achieved. Still, Augustine prefers that the proper goal of biblical reading be secured by a faithful interpretation of the text.

Augustine's principle of charity, when combined with his other salient hermeneutical reflections, provided the substance of a Christian literary theory that proved to be exceedingly influential for more than a millennium. Indeed, it is a kind of

“moral criticism” that also has some striking similarities to contemporary poststructuralist literary reflection that demonstrates that all texts are tinged with a particular ideology, and are never read with neutrality, or in an ethical vacuum.⁵⁴ Augustine recognized as clearly as anyone that the Bible was written with clear purpose (ideology) in mind, namely a relationship with its ultimate Author, and that an ethical responsibility was incurred in the encounter with the sacred text, namely that it must be subjected to an “agapic reading.” The Bible was a politico-spiritual document, so to speak, and reading it ought to result in personal transformation.

A question worth investigating, especially for avid Christian readers of all kinds of texts, is whether or not Augustine’s principle of charity can be extended to include other types of literary genres as well? Can poetry, short stories, novels, essays, biography and so on also be read agapically with a view to enhancing love for God and neighbor? Is it even possible that an encounter with the most “secular” forms of literature, even those with ungodly and perverse content, can culminate in renewed affection for Jesus Christ and other human beings? I think that it is quite possible to transfer Augustine’s insights, in particular his principle of charity, to the entire spectrum of the reading experience for the thoughtful Christian. So does David L. Jeffrey. He believes that the momentum of Augustine’s literary theories are such “as to carry the energies of textual study outward into the whole realm of human inquiry, the *universitas* of humane wisdom, but only to

⁵⁴ Jeffrey, *People of the Book*, 89-96. Hugh C. Holman and William Harmon, *A Handbook to Literature*, 5th ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1986), 313, have defined moral criticism as the practice of judging literature “according to the ethical principles that, in a given critic’s opinion, should govern human life.” Northrop Frye, Sheridan Baker, and George Perkins, *The Harper Handbook to Literature* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 131 suggest that moral criticism is based on the belief that “literature has an effect upon the way people lead their lives” and that “one of the legitimate concerns of criticism is an appropriate response to that belief.”

draw their comprehension back again into concrete enactment of the word and will of God as summarized in the Great Commandment.”⁵⁵

Perhaps, then, a comprehensive agapic reading is possible, but only on the basis of at least two theological assumptions. The first is a sacramental conception of the sum-total of reality and human life. This is established upon the pervasive and profound implications of the fact that “God the Father Almighty” is indeed the “Maker of heaven and earth” (Apostles’ Creed). Average denizens of our contemporary modern or postmodern age tend to view ordinary existence and every day human experience within a naturalistic framework, that is, in the context of a *Weltanschauung* in which all things have been thoroughly demythologized and disenchanting. Things are otherwise for theists whose spiritual sensitivities enable them to recognize the universe as the divine handiwork that is “charged with the grandeur of God” (Gerard Manley Hopkins). Such a sacramental view of reality means that this world is seen as “the visible sign of an invisible reality, a world thoroughly impregnated with the energy, purpose, and love of its Creator, who dwells in it as He dwells in the bread and wine on the altar.”⁵⁶ In such a context, as Thomas Howard has pointed out, “ordinariness . . . opens out onto mystery.”⁵⁷ And ordinariness, or mystery in disguise, is the stuff of which literature consists.

⁵⁵ Jeffrey, *People of the Book*, 89.

⁵⁶ W. T. Jones, *A History of Western Philosophy*, 2d ed., vol. 2, *The Medieval Mind* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1969), xix.

⁵⁷ Thomas Howard, *Hallowed Be This House* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1976, 1979), 15. Howard has also bemoaned the fact of the disenchantment of the world in these terms: “The ‘secularization’ of life urged on us by science and commerce and modernity generally is surely one of the bleakest myths ever to settle down over men’s imaginations” (13). Thus for this reason, he says “it is hard to see ourselves as walking daily among the hallows—that is, as carrying on the commonplace routines of our ordinary life in the presence of mighty mysteries that would ravish and terrify us if this veil of ordinariness were suddenly stripped away” (9).

The cleverly devised plot and carefully crafted characters of a novel, the multitudinous themes of poetry, the obtuse subjects of academic essays, and the fascinating, tragicomic lives depicted in biography all embody a sacramental reality whether the authors and readers of such texts realize it or not. Literature, in other words, is suffused with the holy, and is a silent praise to God who made all things well. Thus before one can read agapically, one must first learn to read *sacramentally* by becoming aware that the content encountered in literary texts is the bearer of transcendence. In this sense, there is no such thing as non-religious literature.

The second assumption establishing a foundation for universal agapic reading is found in the recognition that despite the pervasiveness and perversion of sin, the goodness of God's creation endures, and is manifested in any and all circumstances. Nothing is totally evil or can be totally corrupted by evil. If it could, it would not exist, for evil is not a thing, but a lack in and corruption of things. Indeed, evil is a parasite which attaches itself to something originally good. Only because of the continued existence of the essentially good host does the parasite of evil exist at all. Thus even in the most despicable of situations, something of the original creation continues and is evident to the perceptive observer. Albert Wolters has expressed this thesis as clearly and succinctly as anyone.

The central point to make is that, biblically speaking, sin neither abolishes nor becomes identified with creation. Creation and sin remain distinct, however closely they may be intertwined in our experience. Prostitution does not eliminate the goodness of sexuality; political tyranny cannot wipe out the divinely ordained character of the state; the anarchy and subjectivism of much of modern art cannot obliterate the creational legitimacy of art itself. In short, evil does not have the power of bringing to naught God's steadfast faithfulness to the works of his hands.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Albert Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985), 47.

Thus in literature that embodies apparently irredeemable content, including such things as inveterate pride, heartless envy, unquenchable anger, chronic laziness, unrestrained greed, uncontrolled gluttony, and inordinate lust, there is, believe it or not, an underlying expression of a good, sacramental order that has been deeply disrupted by radical rebellion and disobedience. Literary texts depict the structures of God's good creation that have been woefully misdirected by human intransigence. Sin caricatures creation, but is absolutely incapable of destroying it. Because the havoc which sin reeks upon creation is always kept in check by the providence and laws of God, it is possible when evil, distortion, and corruption are encountered in the reading process to observe and appreciate aspects of the divine, sacramental order that are surreptitiously manifested amidst the chaos. While this argument is not meant to be an encouragement to read any and every kind of literature willy nilly without regard for its content or moral impact, it is nevertheless an attempt to suggest that the kinds of characters, themes, and events we encounter in the normal course of reading and study can be viewed in a fresh, redemptive manner. Thus before one can read agapically, one must first learn to read *providentially* by recognizing that because of the power of God, sin is unable to destroy His handiwork, and that glimmers of Himself and the goodness of creation are everywhere evident despite the presence of evil.

Thus in attempting to read various types of literature agapically, we would do well to ask ourselves the following questions in light of the preceding considerations: (1) What aspects of the divine, sacramental reality are on display in this particular text we are reading? (2) How has human sin and disobedience misdirected and perverted this aspect of God's handiwork? (3) In what ways are aspects of the original goodness of God's creation still evident despite the corruption present in this situation? (4) In what ways could this aspect of life and reality be redeemed and redirected for God's glory and human benefit? (5) How can what I have met and detected in this particular text—which

is an expression of the sacramental nature of reality, exhibits significant corruption by sin, manifests the enduring goodness of creation, and is potentially redeemable in Christ—be transformed into an increase in love for God as well as our neighbors? If we can master the prerequisites of reading both sacramentally and providentially, then hopefully we can find success in discovering how to read all texts—biblically and otherwise—agapically. Perhaps it is the highest purpose of reading for a Christian. And it may be one of the most effective ways to be about the business of integrating Christian faith and learning.

Sola Deo Gloria