

Rule of Love and Rule of Faith in Augustine's Hermeneutics: A Complex Dialectic of the Twofold Rules

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Abstract: Since the sixteenth-century Reformation, literal interpretation of the Bible has been deemed the best hermeneutical method to unearth the biblical writers' original meaning. For the Reformers, allegorical interpretation was denigrated for reading an extraneous, or spiritual, meaning into any text. Although Augustine was among the first who champions a literal interpretation of the Scripture—as he outlined in his *De doctrina christiana*—until recent decades, Augustine is still being perceived as inconsistent in following his hermeneutical method as it is attested in his interpretation of the Good Samaritan. In his interpretation, Augustine seems to have allegorized the parable, thus his method was accused of being inconsistent. Is it really the case? This article attempts to contest such an accusation by showing that Augustine's method of interpretation cannot simply be categorized as either entirely literal or allegorical. Augustine never professes as a literalist, an exegete who only applies what is now known as a historical-critical method. On the other hand, he did not recklessly legitimate the application of allegorical reading to any text. Taken as a whole, Augustine's hermeneutics revolves around a complex dialectic of *regula dilectionis* (the rule of love) and *regula fidei* (the rule of faith) that allows both interpretations to be considered to be true.

Research Highlights

- This article will remark on Augustine's interpretative method as described in his *De doctrina christiana*. His twofold method, the rule of love and the rule of faith, may be viewed as interpretative goals and means that must be regarded as part of a cohesive hermeneutical process that Augustine attempted to develop.
- According to the author, Augustine is best classified as neither a literalist nor an allegorist. His hermeneutics is a profound dialectic of the rule of love and the rule of faith that permits both literal and allegorical readings to be regarded as valid.

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INTRODUCTION

In the opening paragraph of his *De doctrina christiana*, Saint Augustine clearly states his primary purpose in writing the book, which is to communicate certain rules for interpreting the scriptures, so that those with an appetite for such a study may be enabled to progress, not just by reading someone else's "commentaries" on scriptures but also by finding illumination themselves (*Preface*, 1).¹ In other words, Augustine was set to instruct his readers on how to conduct a responsible reading of the Scriptures.²

Despite the genius and lasting significance of *Doctr. chr.*, Augustine has been accused of practicing allegorical interpretation of the Scriptures, which means that he did not seem to follow through with complete consistency in applying his theory.³ Although Augustine highly influenced literal interpretation, up until recent decades, he is still being perceived as not consistent in following his hermeneutical method. From the wing of Dutch Reformed tradition, Riemer Roukema, for instance, accuses Augustine of neglecting the importance of historically correct exegesis.⁴

As a prime example, his interpretation of the Good Samaritan allegorizes elements of the parable. Just to mention some: Adam is the man, Jerusalem is the heavenly city of peace, from whose blessedness Adam fell, and Jericho signifies mortality. It was believed to be a result of and inspired by the controversy with the Pelagian about free will rather than a plain reading on the text.⁵

Furthermore, the hermeneutics of the sixteenth century Reformation decisively reject allegorical interpretation.⁶ For the Reformers, allegorical interpretation was denigrated for reading an extraneous or spiritual meaning into a text without sufficient consideration for the basic principle of similarity or analogy.⁷

As a result, Augustine is often accused of making allegorical interpretation the real or ultimate meaning of the Bible over the literal interpretation.⁸ Some even conclude that

¹All translations and paragraph references are taken from Saint Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, trans. R.P.H. Green (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). Henceforth *De doctrina christiana* will be abbreviated to *Doctr. chr.*

²However, as it is collected and commented upon by James A. Andrews, there are at least four views on the purpose of *De Doctrina Christiana*: as biblical hermeneutics with a rhetorical appendix, as a textbook for the Clergy, as a rhetorical handbook, and for the formation of Christian culture. This article follows Andrews' conclusion that "it would be helpful to describe *Doctr. chr.* as an expanded hermeneutics because it concerns the interpretation of a text, but an interpretation that involves more than understanding." See James A. Andrews, *Hermeneutics and the Church: In Dialogue with Augustine* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012), 23–41.

³Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970), 35.

⁴Riemer Roukema, "The Good Samaritan in Ancient Christianity," *Vigiliae Christianae* 58, no. 1 (January 2004): 74, <https://doi.org/10.1163/157007204772812331>.

⁵*Ibid.*, 70.

⁶Additionally, Robert M. Grant writes: "Protestant interpretation of the Bible owes its life to the spirit of the Reformation." See Robert M. Grant, *The Bible in the Church* (New York: Macmillan, 1948), 109. See also Mark E. Sell, "Biblical Hermeneutics and Modern Linguistics," *Logia: A Journal of Lutheran Theology* 4, no. 2 (April 1995): 3.

⁷Wendy Elgersma Helleman, "Abraham Had Two Sons: Augustine and the Allegory of Sarah and Hagar (Galatians 4:21-31)," *Calvin Theological Journal* 48, no. 1 (2013): 36. See also R.P.C. Hanson, *Allegory and Event: A Study of the Sources and Significance of Origen's Interpretation of Scripture* (Louisville: WJK, 2002), 7.

⁸Augustine, said Ramm, was driven to the allegorical interpretation of Scripture by his own spiritual plight. The allegorical interpretation of Scripture by Ambrose illuminated much of the Old Testament to him when he was struggling with the crass literalism of the Manicheans. He took it to mean that the spiritual or allegorical interpretation was the real meaning of the Bible; the literal interpretation kills. See Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970), 35.

Augustine justified his allegorical interpretations from 2 Corinthians 3:6, “For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.”⁹

Nevertheless, numerous attempts have been made to understand the hermeneutics of Augustine. For example, Brett W. Smith tries to seek a theoretical justification for the multiplicity of meaning in Augustine’s hermeneutics. As attested in *Confession* 12.30.41–12.32.43 and 13.24.37, as well as *Doctr. chr.* 3.2, Smith argues that “Augustine sees complex divine authorial intention as a theoretical justification for the multiplicity of meaning in scripture.”¹⁰ Some also have tried to bring Augustine into conversation with recent trends in postmodern thought,¹¹ although there was current awareness not to neglect Augustine’s context. For this reason, Michael Glowasky notes the importance of acknowledging Augustine’s own “narrative theory.”¹²

In response to the stated accusation before, and according to these recent findings, the present article argues that Augustine is, in principle, a product of the ancient hermeneutics that accept allegorical readings as true. Thus, Augustine’s hermeneutics ask how a passage can be understood as true in the reader’s language, not by merely asking what the passage means.¹³ On this basis, it will be shown that in *Doctr. chr.*, Augustine never professes that the only true meaning is only the literal one. However, it does not simply mean that Augustine is an allegorist. In fact,

he did not recklessly legitimate the application of allegorical reading to any text.

METHOD

This article will provide a commentary on Augustine’s primary interpretive method explained in his *Doctr. chr.* As a result, there will be shown that Augustine’s twofold method, i.e., *regula dilectionis* or the rule of love; and *regula fidei* or the rule of faith, can be seen as interpretive ends and interpretive means, respectively. Both must be understood as a coherent hermeneutical method that Augustine tried to elaborate. In the end, there will be a discussion over whether the twofold method is used to profess only literal meaning or only allegorical. Considering both the context of ancient hermeneutics and the twofold meaning of Augustine, it will be argued that nowhere does Augustine legitimize literal meaning as the sole and valid approach to hermeneutics.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

For Augustine, it is the spiritual reality that should govern biblical interpretation. According to Augustine’s well-known statement, the most important matter in biblical interpretation is not the accuracy of the historical, grammatical, literary, or philological studies on the texts.¹⁴ He is critical of any *a priori* hermeneutics or biblical criticism which is done without accounting for the two-fold rule of faith and love. Instead, it is more than a

⁹Ibid.; followed by Henry A. Virkler, *Hermeneutics: Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 55.

¹⁰Brett W. Smith, “Complex Authorial Intention in Augustine’s Hermeneutics,” *Augustinian Studies* 45, no. 2 (2014): 216–225, <https://doi.org/10.5840/augstudies201411118>.

¹¹John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon, eds., *Augustine and Postmodernism: Confessions and Circumfession* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2005); L. Boeve, M. Lamberigts, and M. Wisse, eds., *Augustine and Postmodern Thought: A New Alliance Against Modernity* (Leuven: Peeters, 2009).

¹²Michael Glowasky, “The Author Is the Meaning: Narrative in Augustine’s Hermeneutics,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 71, no. 2 (May 2018): 164, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930618000054>.

¹³Gerald L. Bruns, *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 83.

¹⁴Jeff B. Pool, “No Entrance into Truth Except through Love: Contributions from Augustine of Hippo to a Contemporary Christian Hermeneutic of Love,” *Review and Expositor* 101, no. 4 (December 2004): 649–650, <https://doi.org/10.1177/003463730410100406>.

scientific inspection of the scriptures. He goes so far as to say that, “Anyone 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” (*Doctr. chr.* 1.86).

This statement, known as the rule of love, marked the final purpose of Augustine’s interpretive model. So, according to Augustine, any interpretive form that does not promote such an end will ultimately be misguided in finding the meaning and truth of the Scriptures.

However, on the other hand, Augustine does not promote a simplistically pragmatic method for the sake of reaching the rule of love. One can derive from any passage an idea that supports the double-love he mentioned, but if it is not the intention of the writer of the scriptures, it is still to be called a deviation. Instead of seeing this deviation as a hermeneutical error, it is still considered as reaching the destination of hermeneutical practice. In Augustine’s words:

If, as I began by saying, 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 (*Doctr. chr.* 1.88).

Nevertheless, for Augustine, one must avoid overemphasizing the method. Some scholars go too far, arguing that the hermeneutics of *Doctr. chr.* is based on his semiotics theory of

the sign and things signified, the relation of *res* and *signum*. In other words, they argue that in *Doctr. chr.*, Augustine emphasized the way of hermeneutics, a method of interpretation using his theory of sign and thing signified.

In contrast to the accusations, the hermeneutics found in *Doctr. chr.* is not a mere method. Indeed, Augustine paid much attention to the method. Nevertheless, he stressed the *telos* or end of Scripture, which is love. Hermeneutics, even correct doctrine, is only the beginning. All of those must relate with appropriate love. Scripture’s *telos* is to engender the appropriate love of God and neighbor.¹⁵ This is precisely the inadequacy of the modern method of biblical hermeneutics. The focus of modern hermeneutics is mostly on the method of exegesis, for it is more in line with the scientific way of gathering evidence. The spiritual nature of the Scripture is set aside for the sake of the method. On the other hand, Augustine’s hermeneutics lends itself to the double-love rule. This is the end of the interpretation of the Scripture. However, Augustine is not neglecting the method. Thus, it is not only the rule of love; Augustine also observes the rule of faith.

Augustine also mentions the rule of faith in his writings. He uses the term *regula fidei* or *regula veritatis* to refer to the church’s rule.¹⁶ Generally speaking, this method of interpretation is not foreign to the Reformed tradition as it is attested in the Second Helvetic Confession.

We hold that interpretation of the Scripture to be orthodox and genuine which is gleaned from the Scriptures themselves and which agree with the rule of faith and

¹⁵Andrews, *Hermeneutics and the Church: In Dialogue with Augustine*, 136–137.

¹⁶Bryan M. Litfin, “The Rules of Faith in Augustine,” *Pro Ecclesia* 14, no. 1 (February 2005): 86–88, <https://doi.org/10.1177/106385120501400106>.

love, and contributes much to the glory of God and man's salvation.¹⁷

The rule of faith can also be understood as the Christians' creed(s). This can be understood as church authority and tradition in understanding the whole Scripture. Litfin summarizes:

The rule of faith very often functioned as an interpretive device for Augustine, in which the apostolic faith was summarized and could be brought to bear on pressing theological or exegetical questions.¹⁸

So, according to Augustine, the rule of faith—that is, the apostolic faith—is the standard formula that should guide the interpretation of the Scripture. Thus, it would not be true if one were to accuse Augustine of making arbitrary decisions on how to allegorize a scriptural passage. He was careful enough to govern the result of his allegorical interpretation not to be contrary to the apostolic faith.

Thus, for Augustine, all interpretations of Scripture should begin and be examined based on the rule of love and the rule of faith. If the result of the interpretation is too cognitively oriented, then it falsifies the first rule. On the other hand, if the result is not congruent with the apostolic faith, it falsifies the second. From these hermeneutical convictions, Augustine moves to the interpretive method, literal and allegorical.

Thus far, it has been argued that the foundation of hermeneutics, according to Augustine, is the rule of love and the rule of faith. From such foundations, he then offered two models of interpretation—literal and allegorical—where both have the same weight and are applied in different circumstances depending on the text and context. The previous section's

argumentation asserts that allegorical interpretation of the scriptures, for Augustine, while it must be in accord with the rule of faith, is a form used particularly to create harmony with the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture that he holds to.

J. Barton Payne validates this, saying that the key to Augustine's use of allegorical interpretation may well lie in his desire to bring such passages into harmony with his doctrine of inspiration.¹⁹ As Payne explains,

Augustine's doctrine of Scripture includes not simply the men, subjective illumination, but also the work, objective inspiration. While sometimes recognizing a human choice of both words and materials, he at other times inclines to simple dictation, "*Spiritu Dei dictante dicti et conscripti sunt.*" However, this inconsistency be resolved, the net result is verbal inspiration; the words are as much God's as if He spoke them all.²⁰

Even yet, Augustine's idea of inspiration has been interpreted so strictly by some that he has been accused of advocating a verbal dictation view of the Bible. This process is similar to the revelation of the Qur'an to Mohammad in the Islamic tradition. James Sawyer comments that such accusations come to the fore because of Augustine's use of the term *dictare*. In truth, he held to the vital involvement of the human authors with their material. He states:

Each of the Evangelists believed it to have been his duty to relate the matters he was engaged in recording, in that order in which pleased God to bring them to his recollection. Matthew followed the authority of the Holy Ghost, under whose guidance he felt his mind to be directed more than is

¹⁷Arthur C. Cochrane, ed., *Reformed Confessions of the 16th Century* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966), 266.

¹⁸Litfin, "The Rules of Faith in Augustine," 86–88.

¹⁹J. Barton Payne, "Biblical Problems and Augustine's Allegorizing," *Westminster Theological Journal* 14, no. 1 (1951): 49.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 50.

the case with us. It is under this type of recognition that he is able to deal with stylistic differences between various authors within the text.²¹

After all, Toom has argued that the verb *dictare*, however, must not mean passive instrumentality and should not be filled, anachronistically, with the narrow dogmatic meaning that it acquired later. The verb *dictare* can also be rendered as ‘charge, direct, urge, incite.’²²

However, Augustine indeed believed that the Bible was divinely inspired. To him, the Scriptures were the work of God’s own hands because they were completed by the operation of the Holy Ghost, who worked in the Holy authors.²³ Nevertheless, some noticed that Augustine is not consistent in stating his position on the doctrine of inspiration. Sawyer, for instance, says that “Augustine stressed the human side of inspiration so much, at times the divine seems to have disappeared completely. While at other times the divine is stressed to the apparent exclusion of the human.”²⁴ In trying to resolve this tension, Andries Polman has stated: “The Bible was both the exclusive work of the Holy Spirit alone and at the same time the work of the biblical writers.”²⁵

The problem becomes more complicated when one connects Augustine’s doctrine of inspiration to his theory of sign and thing signified. On the one hand, all signs God gives to men signify spiritual realities. However, on

the other hand, God gives those signifiers in the form of material realities. Toom concludes that

After all, the actual words in Scripture are but conventional signs in human languages, given deliberately by human beings. This means that God’s Word is mediated through human words (all words are human words!) as well as that such mediation often sets its own impediments to the process of communication.²⁶

Thus, in modern terms, Augustine believes that the divine inspiration of Scripture was plenary. The Scripture is a double-authored text: the divine and human(s) authors.²⁷ Augustine contends that “the divinely given signs contained in the holy scriptures have been communicated to us by the human beings who wrote them.”²⁸ This doctrine, then, when it comes to the work of interpretation, should be in harmony with Augustine’s hermeneutical rules. Accordingly, Toom was correct in pointing out that the importance of the human authorial intention is not the ultimate hermeneutical criterion for Augustine.²⁹ So, when Augustine said that symbolic meaning is used when anything in the divine discourse cannot be related either to good morals or to the true faith, it could be seen as an effort to harmonize the entire truth on the Bible.

Augustine believes that God speaks through human words that signify realities beyond themselves.³⁰ He affirms both the “speaking

²¹M. James Sawyer, “The History of the Doctrine of Inspiration from the Ancient Church through the Reformation,” *Bible.org*, June 3, 2004, accessed April 27, 2019, <https://bible.org/article/history-doctrine-inspiration-ancient-church-through-reformation>.

²²Tarmo Toom, “Augustine on Scripture,” in *T&T Clark Companion to Augustine and Modern Theology*, ed. C.C. Pecknold and Tarmo Toom (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 80.

²³T.V. Philip, “The Authority of Scripture in the Patristic Period,” *Indian Journal of Theology* 23, no. 1–2 (1974): 4. See also Augustine, *Civ.* 10.1.2.

²⁴Sawyer, “The History of the Doctrine of Inspiration.”

²⁵A.D.R. Polman, *The Word of God According to St. Augustine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 51.

²⁶Toom, “Augustine on Scripture,” 78.

²⁷Tarmo Toom, ed., *Patristic Theories of Biblical Interpretation: The Latin Fathers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 96–97.

²⁸Augustine, *Doctr. chr.* 2.3.

²⁹Toom, *Patristic Theories of Biblical Interpretation*, 97.

³⁰Helleman, “Augustine and the Allegory of Sarah and Hagar,” 42.

God” and the usefulness of material means, such as human languages and written texts for human comprehension of this “speaking God.”³¹ For Augustine,

The aim of its [scriptures] readers is simply to find out the thoughts and wishes of those by whom it was written down and, through them, the will of God, which we believe these men followed as they spoke (*Doctr. chr.* 2.9).

Thus, *Doctr. chr.* focuses on words as signs to communicate spiritual truth. Such a notion is developed throughout the second book. For Augustine, the sign is a thing that makes other things come to mind, besides the impression that it presents to the senses.³²

Scripture is the divinely given signs used to communicate to humans by other human beings who wrote them.³³ However, the sign could be understood in two senses: literal and allegorical. The former is called literal when used to signify the things they invented. The latter occurs when that designated by a literal sign is used to signify something else.³⁴ So, there are at least two forms of valid interpretation for Augustine.

If both senses are valid, it clearly shows that Augustine does not prefer allegorical meaning over literal or vice versa. It is also not his intention to make those distinctions. Toom summarized clearly on this thought that

The meaning of a scriptural utterance cannot be restricted to the humanly intended historical meaning in the original context of an utterance because the Spirit of God may intend meanings beyond it to people in other circumstances and times.³⁵

Thus, both literal and allegorical readings are valid for biblical interpretation as long as the divinely intended meanings are in hand. Furthermore, Michael Cameron convincingly argues that in *Doctr. chr.*, there was an advanced Christological dimension in Augustine’s hermeneutics. Christ’s humanity as salvific mediator relativized the significance of his flesh. The material text of Scriptures must also be relativized to bridge to Christ’s divine reality. This “Christ’s pedagogic strategy, then, uses his own person to teach the soul to desire earthly things only as a means to spiritual ends.”³⁶

Although they are both valid, Augustine frames a general rule regarding the usage. He believes that the literal reading of the scriptures, on average, is easier to discern. Passages that promote good morals and true faith will be read literally. Conversely, “anything in the divine discourse that cannot be related either to good morals or true faith should be taken as allegorical or figurative” (*Doctr. chr.* 3.33).

Knowledge of the original language of the scriptures is also required as an aid before applying such rule. Augustine suggests that

³¹Toom, “Augustine on Scripture,” 77.

³²Hence Augustine’s analogies: “So when we see a footprint we think that animal whose footprint it is has passed by; when we see smoke we realize that there is fire beneath it; when we hear the voice of an animate being we observe its feeling; and when the trumpet sounds soldiers know they must advance or retreat or do whatever else the state of the battle demands.” See *ibid.*, 30.

³³Augustine, *Doctr. chr.* 2.1–3. Given signs, contrary to natural signs, are those which living things give to each other, to show, to the best of their ability, the emotions of their minds, or anything that they have felt or learned. Natural signs, on the other side, are those which without a

wish or any urge to signify cause something else besides themselves to be known from them, like smoke, which signifies fire.

³⁴Augustine, *Doctr. chr.* 2.32.

³⁵Toom, *Patristic Theories of Biblical Interpretation: The Latin Fathers*, 97; See also Tarmo Toom, “Augustine’s Case for the Multiplicity of Meanings,” *Augustinian Studies* 45, no. 2 (2014): 183–201, <https://doi.org/10.5840/augstudies20141095>.

³⁶Michael Cameron, *Christ Meets Me Everywhere: Augustine’s Early Figurative Exegesis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 228.

the student of the scriptures should acquire a good understanding of the Hebrew and Greek language to apprehend their meaning more accurately. This is in accord with his earlier principle that God has revealed his words through human language as signs that referred to things. Thus, to understand the signs given by God through human language, one should learn the language, Hebrew and Greek, in the original.

Indeed, words in language function as signs for things. Unfortunately, one should admit a limitation in interpreting Scripture with this notion. The fact that God's Word is communicated to the people is the sign of the authoritative language of Scripture. That also means that God must accommodate this communication to the imperfection of the human language. That is why Karlfried Froehlich said that

Augustine realized that language not only presents infinite opportunities for interaction but also comes with its own set of problems. God's revelation in Scripture, God's pulling back the veil, necessitates a new covering: God's perfect Word takes on the veil of our imperfect language. The focal point of Augustine's sign theory is his consideration of language, words being for him the primary category of signs.³⁷

However, the mastery of the original language of the Bible, at some point, will ease the way for the student of the scriptures to understand at least the literal meaning of it. Nevertheless, says Augustine, one should explore and analyze obscure passages. Augustine provides another rule of interpretation that deals with obscure passages. This rule is much like the "Scripture interprets Scripture" principle known in the Reformed tradition, which is by

taking examples from the more obvious parts to illuminate obscure expressions and uses the evidence of indisputable passages to remove the uncertainty of ambiguous ones.³⁸ The Westminster Confession of Faith 1.9 stated that

The Infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself; and, therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one) it must be search and known by other places that speak more clearly.³⁹

From the article in Westminster Confession of Faith above, one can see Augustine's reminiscence on how to deal with obscured passages of the Scripture. However, while the "Scripture interprets Scripture" method is maintained, there is a strong rejection of the manifold meaning, which is another feature of Augustine's hermeneutics method. Thus, Augustine cannot simply be categorized as a pure literalist in the Reformed tradition sense.

Other tools for removing the ambiguity from difficult scriptural passages are also validated by the fact of God's general revelation—that is, all the members of human knowledge bestowed by God. That is why, for Augustine, the study of natural sciences as well as history, philosophy, and logic is essential. At this intersection, Augustine applies his famous analogy of "plundering the Egyptians." Just as God commanded the Israelites to take with them the gold and silver of Egypt (Ex 12:35-36), so the biblical interpreter should not hesitate to take from pagan scholars what is useful and true.⁴⁰

However useful and true the method is, it must nevertheless be congruent with the rule

³⁷Karlfried Froehlich, "'Take up and Read': Basics of Augustine's Biblical Interpretation," *Interpretation* 58, no. 1 (January 2004): 12–13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002096430405800102>.

³⁸Augustine, *Doctr. chr.* 2.31.

³⁹See John Macpherson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (New York: Wentworth, 2016).

⁴⁰Augustine, *Doctr. chr.* 2.151. See also Froehlich, "Basics of Augustine's Biblical Interpretation," 13.

of faith, or *regula fidei*. In the words of Augustine:

Once close consideration has revealed that it is uncertain how a passage should be punctuated and articulated, we must consult the rule of faith, as it is perceived through the plainer passages of the scriptures and the authority of the church (*Doctr. chr.* 3.3).

In book three of *Doctr. chr.*, Augustine attempts to settle the issue of the inevitability of ambiguities in the meaning of biblical words. Assume the ambiguity is more than a mere mispronunciation on the reader's side. In that case, Augustine's first line of advice is, "let (the interpreter) consult the rule of faith, which he has received from the more obvious passages of scripture and the authority of the church" (*Doctr. chr.* 3.3). According to Bryan Litfin,

This statement brings into view two of the three interrelated concepts which we have just suggested help us understand how the rule of faith functioned for Augustine. First, we can discern that the rule should serve as a received ecclesiastical summary. The received entity bears the *auctoritas ecclesiae*, for it is an authoritative norm handed down within the catholic church. Yet it is also distilled out of the "more obvious passages of Scripture," which is to say it is an abridged summary of the ideas found in the church's holy writings. Second, we can also see that the rule could serve as a criterion by which to form a judgment. Apparently, the rule should be frequently consulted and brought to bear on whatever difficulty presented itself to the interpreter.⁴¹

The rule of faith for Augustine will provide certain theological boundaries, but within

those boundaries, there is a degree of exegetical flexibility. Augustine describes what he means by using John 1:1 as an example. It is possible to read the text with the syntax intact, yet in such a way as to make it deny that the Word is fully divine. The reading is illegitimate, Augustine said, because the rule does not allow it. He writes, "This is to be refuted by the rule of faith, in which it is predetermined for us that there is equality in the Trinity so that we must say 'and the Word was God'" (*Doctr. chr.* 3.5). Thus, an Arian reading of the Fourth Gospel is rendered impossible, based on the rule of faith. Following this example from John 1, Augustine discusses several further textual ambiguities in which none of the interpretative choices are incompatible with the faith (*Doctr. chr.* 3.6–9). In situations like this, the interpreter has the freedom to resolve the matter in whichever way he sees suitable.

One should always note that Augustine develops his hermeneutical rules not as parts of a mere method of interpretation but as remedies for the obstacles by which the signs of language block the view of the true thing of Scripture, which is to love God and neighbor.⁴² This should always be kept in mind to retain the spiritual dimension of Augustine's method of interpretation.

However, there will be times when one finds difficulties reading the scriptures even though some rules have already been applied. Interestingly, a solution offered by Augustine is a kind of middle way between what is known as the grammatical-historical and reader-response approaches. There should be an attempt to find an authorial intention, but at the same time, Augustine believes that one could arrive at multiple meanings. Above all of those struggles, however, he believes that a good interpreter should consult the rule of faith. Sometimes, according to Augustine,

⁴¹Litfin, "The Rules of Faith in Augustine," 90–91.

⁴²Froehlich, "Basics of Augustine's Biblical Interpretation," 13.

not just one meaning but two or more meanings are perceived in the same words of Scripture. Even if the writer's meaning is obscure, there is no danger here, provided that it can be shown from other passages of the holy scriptures that each of these interpretations is consistent with the truth. The person examining the divine utterances must of course do his best to arrive at the intention of the writer through whom the Holy Spirit produced that part of Scripture; he may reach that meaning or carve out from the words another meaning which does not run counter to the faith, using the evidence of any other passage of the divine utterances (*Doctr. chr.* 3.84).

Even though several interpretations are possible for him in a particular verse, Augustine does not undermine literal meaning. For instance, in his commentary on Genesis, he interprets the first three chapters in terms of the events themselves. Froehlich notes that Augustine

Acknowledged the strong presence of metaphor in the anthropomorphic language of the creation story and interpreted figurative expressions as such but assumed that the basic facts were true and real as reported. Augustine was convinced that figurative speech must and can be validated by careful and rigorous reasoning. "The narrative in these books," he says in introducing his exposition of Genesis 2:8, "is not in the genre of figurative language as in the Song of Songs but altogether factual as in the books of Kings and the other writings of this kind."⁴³

Thus, he defends the logical historical plausibility of narrative details everywhere before

considering a "twofold meaning" or the purely prophetic signification of a verse or phrase.⁴⁴

Although it is already noted that, for Augustine, anything in the divine discourse that cannot be related either to good morals or to the true faith should be taken as allegorical or figurative, the allegorical interpretation does not serve as a shortcut in the interpretive method. Allegorical interpretation also has its difficulties. Augustine, for instance, notes the feature of allegorical language that lacks consistent reference. It appears obvious in the term "lion." For example, the "lion of Judah" is Christ, but the devil also "goes about roaring like a lion." For this reason, Augustine concludes that the scriptural authors used figures of speech far more than one might expect.⁴⁵

Thus, either literal or allegorical interpretation serves only as a tool for understanding the scriptures. Above that, it should be noted again that Augustine's allegorical method of interpretation only serves to spiritualize, or more accurately, to neutralize or even to avoid, the meaning of a text that contains or promotes distortions of genuine love, the rule of love,⁴⁶ as it is said by Augustine himself,

Generally speaking, it is this: anything in the divine discourse that cannot be related either to good morals or to the true faith should be taken as figurative. Good morals have to do with our love of God and our neighbour, the true faith with our understanding of God and our neighbour (*Doctr. chr.* 3.33–34).

Moreover, Augustine was still a product of his time. In his time, allegory was not necessarily a bad interpretive practice. In fact, at that time, hermeneutics was used to understand some texts to make the reader comprehend

⁴³Ibid., 6–7.

⁴⁴Ibid., 7.

⁴⁵ Frances Young, "Augustine's Hermeneutics and Postmodern Criticism" *Interpretation* 58, no. 1 (January 2004): 50, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002096430405800105>.

⁴⁶Pool, "No Entrance into Truth," 651.

what they read rather than to find the author's own intended meaning. Gerald Bruns was right to say that, "Allegory is, crudely, the squaring of an alien conceptual scheme with one's own on the charitable assumption that there is a sense in which they are coherent with one another."⁴⁷

As truthfully described by Cameron, Augustine "render the God of the Scripture as an orator who used different devices at different times to communicate with humanity," and "the ultimate purpose of knowing Scripture was to know its Author."⁴⁸

Finally, the *regula* helps determine the validity of an interpretation. *Regula dilectionis* helps determine whether a passage is literal or figurative, and *regula fidei* serves as the guardian of the interpretation, although it does not supersede interpretation. This is a canonical exercise to help determine the meaning of the parts. Furthermore, *regula fidei* is not the end of the hermeneutics; it lays out the things to which scripture points, which is its Author.⁴⁹

CONCLUSION

As an interpreter, Augustine is not easily categorized. Until recent decades, he is still regarded as an interpreter that is inconsistent with his own hermeneutical method. The discussions above show that the accusation is highly influenced by the assumption that (1) literal meaning is the best hermeneutical practice, (2) since Augustine elaborated the literal meaning in *De doctrina christiana*, he seemed to agree with the literal sense, thus (3) Augustine was supposedly a literalist.

This paper has attempted to demonstrate that, at least based on his *De doctrina christiana*, one should be aware that nowhere Augustine legitimizes literal meaning as the

only valid way of construing scriptural meaning. On the other hand, he did not recklessly legitimate the application of allegorical reading to any text. Instead, his hermeneutics revolves around the rule of love and faith but are also open for multiple interpretations as long as they do not violate these two foundations. Hence, Augustine is better to be categorized as neither a literalist nor an allegorist. Taken as a whole, Augustine's hermeneutics is a complex dialectic of the rule of love and the rule of faith that allows both interpretations to be considered to be true.

AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

The author is responsible for the analysis, interpretation, and discussion of the research results. The author has read and approved the final manuscript.

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⁴⁷Bruns, *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern*, 85.

⁴⁸Cameron, *Christ Meets Me Everywhere*, 49.

⁴⁹Andrews, *Hermeneutics and the Church*, 141.

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