

Augustine's steps in the study of Scripture

The Bible lies at the heart of Christian life and at the heart of the church's life. From the beginning, Christians have lived from and with the Bible. And from the beginning, Christians have thought carefully about *how* to read and understand the Bible. One early Christian who thought especially carefully, and long, about interpreting the Bible was a North African, Aurelius Augustinus Hipponensus, who lived from 354 to 430 AD. The first of his names identifies him as a Roman citizen, while the last locates him in what is now Algeria. We know him by his middle name, Augustine. Or *Saint* Augustine, though his early adult years were anything but saintly. He confesses as much in his *Confessions*, a book that ranks among the enduring classics of western literature. But Augustine did not intend merely to write a piece of literature; he meant to bear witness to God's sovereign mercy and to his own Christian faith. As a confessing Christian, Augustine became a bishop, with a responsibility to teach the pastors under his care. To that end he wrote a manual of Christian instruction, *On Christian Teaching*—its Latin title is *de doctrina christiana*—whose focus is the interpretation of Scripture.

Like the rest of us, Augustine was a clay vessel (2 Cor 4:7). Some of his views we would disagree with or even find repugnant. It may be, though, that the instruction about scriptural interpretation he offered to pastors in North Africa offers us wise counsel today. It may even offer counsel for our engagement with Scripture in disagreement with Augustine ... and with each other.

In his manual, *On Christian Teaching*, Augustine instructed the pastors under his care, first of all to attend carefully to words and grammar and rhetoric, which are the "particulars" in and through which God communicates in Scripture. But he also taught that there are seven steps in the study of Scripture. The first step is **fear** of God, which directs us to learning God's will. The second step is **piety**, which prevents us from contradicting Scripture when it attacks our vices and from thinking ourselves wiser than Scripture. The third step, incorporating both of the first two, is **knowledge**. It involves the careful study of Scripture, its language and signs, but under the rule that nothing is found in Scripture "except ... that God is to be loved [for God's own sake], and our neighbor for the sake of God." This knowledge causes us to realize that we are enmeshed in love of the world, so fear and piety drive us to lamentation. Prayer for consolation and divine assistance then lead us to the fourth step, which is **fortitude**: hungering and thirsting after justice, and turning to the love of eternal things, and "specifically toward that immutable unity which is the Trinity." Realizing that we "cannot sustain the sight of that light," we purge our minds so that we come to the fifth step, which is the counsel of **mercy**. Here we exercise ourselves in love of neighbor and in the perfection of that love. And, "filled with hope and fortified in strength," we arrive at the love of our enemies, and ascend to the sixth step, which involves **cleansing**. Here we cleanse "that eye through which God may be seen," insofar as God can be seen by those who die to the world. And we cleanse the eye of our heart, so that we prefer neither our neighbor nor ourselves to the Truth; and will not turn away from the Truth either to please people or to avoid adversity. Such a student of Scripture ascends to the seventh step, **wisdom**, and there enjoys "peace and tranquility."

Ben Ollenburger, PhD, Professor of New Testament, AMBS