

ATR/85:3

Boldness and Reserve: A Lesson from St. Augustine

MIKE HIGTON*

There is a passage from one of Augustine's less frequented texts which has achieved considerable infamy. Whenever critics gather to discuss examples of patristic eisegesis, of allegorical interpretation run wild, someone will turn to Augustine's reading of the parable of the Good Samaritan in *Quaestiones Evangeliorum* 2.19. There such scholars find Augustine polishing the surface of a parable until he can see in it the reflection of the whole of ecclesiastical doctrine; and they find that, looking in Augustine's mirror, their eyes are kept from resting on the parable itself. Augustine's reading is, they say, not an engagement with the parable but its avoidance.

The passage in question runs:

A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho: Adam himself is meant; Jerusalem is the heavenly city of peace, from whose blessedness Adam fell; Jericho means "the moon," and signifies our mortality, because it is born, waxes, wanes, and dies. Thieves are the devil and his angels. Who stripped him, namely, of his immortality; and beat him, by persuading him to sin; and left him half dead, because in so far as man can understand and know God, he lives, but in so far as he is wasted and oppressed by sin, he is dead—he is therefore called half dead. The Priest and Levite who saw him and passed by signify the priesthood and ministry of the Old Testament, which could profit nothing for salvation. Samaritan means "guardian," and therefore the Lord Himself is signified by this name. The binding of the wounds is the restraint of sin. Oil is the comfort of good hope; wine the exhortation to work with fervent spirit. The beast is the flesh in which he deigned to come to us. The being set upon the beast is belief in the incarnation of Christ. The inn is the Church, where travellers are refreshed on their return from pilgrimage to their

* Mike Higton is a lecturer in theology in the departments of theology and life-long learning at the University of Exeter.

heavenly country. The *morrow* is after the resurrection of the Lord. The *two pence* are either the two precepts of love, or the promise of this life and of that which is to come. The *innkeeper* is the Apostle. The supererogatory payment is either his counsel of celibacy, or the fact that he worked with his own hands lest he should be a burden to any of the weaker brethren when the Gospel was new, though it was lawful for him "to live by the Gospel."¹

My purpose is not to deny that this bold exegesis is questionable, for it is certainly that. My suggestion, in this short paper, will rather be that we are wrong if we respond to this undoubted questionability by consigning Augustine's reading to an eisegetical dustbin. We should, I will suggest instead, pay careful attention. Augustine's reading can, if we will let it, teach us precisely that we too must be bold and questionable: that if in order to retreat to safer territory we abandon the shaky ground on which Augustine built his marvelous allegorical edifice, we will miss something essential about exegesis, about the gospel, and about Christian life.

Augustine has another interpretation of the same parable—or, indeed, two linked interpretations—in the first book of *De Doctrina Christiana*, where he investigates the dual love command which is also the immediate context of the parable in the gospels. If we look at these two interpretations first, before turning back to the *Quaestiones Evangeliorum* passage, we will be able to approach Augustine's bold questionability by degrees.

The first interpretation he offers is one which we could call moral: he takes his cue from the commentary found on Jesus' lips: "Go and do thou likewise," and takes the parable as a moral lesson in neighbor-love.

The man to whom our Lord delivered the two love commandments, and to whom he said that on these hang all the law and the prophets, asked him, "And who is my neighbour?" He told him of a certain man who, going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, fell

¹ *Quaestiones Evangeliorum*, 2.19, in C. H. Dodd's slightly abridged translation in *The Parables of the Kingdom* (London: Religious Book Club, 1942), 11-12. Dodd refers to it as that "famous example," and comments, "To the ordinary person of intelligence who approaches the Gospels with some sense for literature this mystification must appear quite perverse" (p. 13). The Latin text can be found in PL 35:1340, and on-line at <http://www.augustinus.it/latino/questioni_vangeli/index.htm>.

among thieves, and was severely wounded by them, and left naked and half dead. And he showed him that nobody was neighbour to this man except him who took pity upon him and came forward to relieve and care for him. And the man who had asked the question admitted the truth of this when he was himself interrogated in turn. To whom our Lord says, "Go and do thou likewise"; teaching us that he is our neighbour whom it is our duty to help in his need, or whom it would be our duty to help if he were in need. Whence it follows that he whose duty it would be in turn to help us is our neighbour. For the name "neighbour" is a relative one, and no one can be neighbour except to a neighbour.²

This is an interesting passage, and more complex than first meets the eye (a complexity due in part to Augustine's attention to the apparent mismatch between the lawyer's question before the parable and the dominical command after it). Here *allegory* has not yet raised its head, but many modern writers on parables would be willing to censure Augustine's exegesis, because they hold that *moral* interpretations of parables are already a sorry decline from the original purity of the parable form. The parable of the Good Samaritan is not primarily a moral example, so the theory goes, but a speech-act which draws us into identification with the injured man, and which transforms our expectations, our horizons, by presenting a neighbor to us in the shape of our enemy. On another occasion, we could ask about the legitimacy of this move from existential, horizon-shifting interpretations to the kind of moral interpretation with which Augustine begins. I personally think that the opposition between existential and moral interpretation is not so great as has sometimes been supposed, unless we take "moral" in a narrow modern sense. I also think that the inclusion of the "go and do thou likewise" command after the parable—whether we feel like ascribing it to Jesus, to the oral tradition, to proto-Luke, to the Lucan redactor, or to anyone else who takes our fancy—already authorizes the move to a moral interpretation. That, however, is a topic for another day.

For now I will ask you to suspend your skepticism for the sake of

² *De Doctrina Christiana* 1.31, tr. J. F. Shaw in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 2, ed. Philip Schaff (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1886); on-line text at <<http://www.ccel.org/a/augustine/doctrine/doctrine.html>>. The Latin text can be found at PL 34:15-122. The *Quaestiones Evangeliorum* passage is probably to be dated to A.D. 399 or 400, the first book of *De Doctrina Christiana* to A.D. 397.

argument and accept this first step, for our concern is with the next step which Augustine takes, a little later in the same book. "Even God himself, our Lord, desired to be called our neighbour. For our Lord Jesus Christ points to himself under the figure of the man who brought aid to him who was lying half dead on the road, wounded and abandoned by the robbers."³ Here, he moves from a *moral* interpretation to a *figural* interpretation: in this parable, he says, Jesus was referring to himself "under the figure" of the Samaritan. The opponents of Augustine's exegesis are likely, I think, to see this as the crucial move: the subject matter ceases at this point to be a moral lesson, let alone a horizon-bursting existential speech-act, and instead becomes Christian doctrine. Further allegorization of individual details in service of a more precise correspondence to Christian doctrine is, they might say, simply icing on the cake: the key problematic move, from their point of view, is this shift from Jesus as proclaimer to Jesus as proclaimed.

Augustine is, of course, wholly right to ignore this criticism. How can a theological reader, he might say, take this lesson about love and isolate it from the broader theological context? Love, for a Christian reader, cannot be taken simply as one existential possibility among others which we are ultimately free to choose or reject; love cannot simply be one piece of moral advice among others—even a piece of moral advice which comes with the backing of an extraneous authority. This parable speaks of love more seriously than that. In speaking of love, this parable speaks (as its context suggests) of the one true content of the law; the one true subject matter of theology; it speaks of the self-same subject matter which is spoken of in every other theological locus. To deny this is to refuse to treat the subject matter of this parable seriously; it is to diminish the parable. It not only severs it from the dual love command which immediately precedes it in the gospels, it removes it from the gospel. A Christian cannot interpret this parable without realizing that, even if she is talking about the revelation of an existential possibility, or about a moral lesson, she is at the very same time talking about things which are grounded in the deepest ways of God with the world, talking about things which are established, revealed, and confirmed in the Incarnation, on the cross, in the resurrection. Once that fundamental unity of the subject mat-

³ *De Doctrina Christiana*, 1.33

ter of the gospel is admitted, it must be an act of extraordinary and artificial restraint *not* to see Christ in the figure of the Good Samaritan, as if a literate person were to strain for a moment to see letters and words simply as oddly-shaped marks on a page. This is not to say that the historical critics are wrong to claim that Jesus did not have all this in mind when he told the parable (and to that extent, we might place a demurral against the *form* of some of Augustine's comments) but they are wrong if they think that Augustine's move to a figural exegesis is essentially a betrayal of the parable. It is the refusal to take this step which betrays the parable.

In one sense, this *does* mean that Augustine knows in advance what the parable must mean. As he so famously says later on in the same book, the subject matter of the whole Bible is love of God and love of neighbor. We should not, however, assume from this that for Augustine—or for us—this parable is dispensable, a redundant repetition of a message that we already know from elsewhere. If that were the case, then the object of Augustinian exegesis would indeed be to annihilate particular texts. No; this interpretation has its context in a book in which Augustine is struggling with the realization *prompted by his exegesis* that the one self-identical subject matter of theology is not quite as he had thought. He is struggling to find the proper way to place the “love thy neighbor” command alongside the “love the Lord thy God” command. His famous discussion of *usus* and *fruitio*, which Oliver O'Donovan's detailed discussion⁴ has shown us *is* a struggle, is a temporary stage in an evolving process by which he tries to come to terms with the intractable shape of the dominical commands, which resist the terms in which he had previously identified and described the one subject matter of theology. What is found here is the same truth that is found elsewhere, but here it is found differently.

So, this figural interpretation is not eisegesis in the sense of an arbitrarily squashing of the gospel *into* a parable, a parable which is *really* about something else. It is rather the discovery that, whatever this parable is really about, it is properly understood *within* the context of the whole gospel, and that the gospel is properly understood *through* this parable.

Even if this sketch of an argument is accepted, however, I am

⁴ O. O'Donovan “*Usus* and *Fruitio* in Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana* I” in *JTS* NS 33 (1982): 361-397.

aware that I have not yet reached a justification of the fuller version of the interpretation of the parable with which I started. Yes, perhaps we can see that a figural interpretation of the parable is an appropriate step, but what about the wholesale allegorization of all the details? Nothing I have said so far appears to justify taking Jericho as signifying mortality, for instance, or the supererogatory payment as indicating Paul's teaching on celibacy.

One path is open to us which I refuse for the moment to take. I could refer simply to Augustine's historical particularity—to his having been steeped in the culture of North Africa in late antiquity, and having inherited the endemic love of riddles and word-play and conjurer's erudition which mark that place and time. Yet, to justify Augustine's practice that way, however true it might be, is to close the conversation with him prematurely. I want to know about the truth of his practice; I don't simply want to excuse it.

And here I confess I have hit a worry. I worry that, although Augustine was right to work on this parable until it became transparent onto the gospel, he might have gone too far. He might have worked at it so hard that all its contingency and particularity, all the grit it picked up from the time and place where it was told, was too easily refined into glass, and became not just transparent but colorless. I begin to wonder whether, despite all that I have said, Augustine *has* neutralized the parable, *has* prevented it from resisting the ideas with which he has approached it. Doesn't this wholesale allegorization turn away from the particular twist given by this parable to the one subject matter of theology, and by a strange alchemy transform its difficult configuration of unfamiliar parts into an easy arrangement of the familiar? I worry that Augustine's tour-de-force of exegetical cleverness denies the abiding *opacity* of this parable, that it prevents us from seeing the parable itself, prevents the parable's peculiarities from coloring and changing the view we have through it of the one theological mystery which is its subject matter.

This worry becomes more serious when we hear Augustine, later in the first book of *De Doctrina Christiana*, saying that

we may learn how essential it is that nothing should detain us on the way, when not even our Lord Himself, so far as He has condescended to be our way, is willing to detain us, but wishes us rather to press on; and, instead of weakly clinging to temporal things, even though these have been put on and worn by Him for our sal-

vation, to pass over them quickly, and to struggle to attain unto Himself, who has freed our nature from the bondage of temporal things, and has set it down at the right hand of His Father.⁵

Augustine speaks of Christ's humanity almost as if it were a ladder which could be kicked away once it had been climbed, as if the spiritually mature person will have no more need of that humanity once he has gained the lessons it has to teach and can contemplate divinity without it. Drawing on Paul's language of "knowing Christ no more after the flesh" from 2 Corinthians 5, Augustine speaks as if the process of theological education is one in which the humanity of Christ becomes ever more transparent until the divinity which is bodied forth in it is grasped, and the humanity ceases to appear. This disappearance of the grit of temporal things is precisely the process I worry has taken place in Augustine's dealings with Christ's parable.

Augustine seems to be lacking, at this stage, an account of the abiding humanity of Christ's participation in the divine life, precisely as human and creaturely and particular and finite—as, we might say, opaque. He is speaking, to put it bluntly, as if he lacked a proper account of the hypostatic union. And my worry is that the move from the figural interpretation that I have supported to the full-blown, detailed allegorization which concerns me speaks of a similar sensibility, one which allows no real room for creaturely participation *as creaturely* in the life of God.

So, in my wrestling with Augustine's interpretation of this parable, I seem to have come to a point where I have to part company with him: where, despite wishing to champion his move to figural interpretation, I wish to hold back from following him all the way, and to demand that he does more justice to what I have called the abiding opacity of Jesus' humanity (his bodiliness, his particularity) *and* to the opacity of Jesus' parable.

Is this parting of the ways fair? Does it do justice to the particular, difficult configuration of Augustine's practice? On the one hand, there are resources in Augustine, even in the first book of *De Doctrina Christiana*, which will help us take a conversation about particularity and bodiliness further: Augustine has important things to say about love of one's body, for instance, and about what it means to love

⁵ *De Doctrina Christiana*.

in particularity, as one contingently thrown into a particular set of relationships. On the other hand, I think we need to ask what a form of interpretation might look like which paid heed to the worry I have raised, and whether it would look so very different from what Augustine has done with the Good Samaritan. What would a form of interpretation look like which agreed with Augustine's move to figural interpretation, but which sought also to do justice to the opacity of the text?

I suggest that the full unity between opacity and transparency is a unity which will only be manifested eschatologically, for it is only at the eschaton that it can become clear how each particular, without diminution of its particularity, stands in relation to God and speaks of and to God. Here before the eschaton our interpretation can only be a partial and tentative anticipation of that eschatological unity, an anticipation which must witness *both* to that unity *and* to its own eschatologically provisional nature. Our interpretations, in order to do justice to the constraints which I have been trying to register, will have to have a certain rhythm to them. Our interpretations will have to oscillate between, on the one hand, moments when they take up Augustine's gauntlet and press the parable until we can see through it to its deepest subject matter, and, on the other hand, moments when the abiding opacity of the parable is registered, as a witness against our tendency to move prematurely to total clarity.

On the one hand, we certainly need something of Augustine's ambition, his desire to find the way in which any and every scriptural text speaks of the selfsame love, and it might just be that we should join Augustine even in full-blown allegorization, as long as we do so in a way which, though serious, indicates its playfulness: a way which indicates the extent to which it runs ahead of the game, compelled by the subject matter to outrun its hermeneutical capability. It may be that we need some such bravado in order to proclaim as strongly as we must that love of God and love of neighbor is the one subject matter of the Bible, and that any story in the Bible of love, of God, or of neighbor is in the end identical with the story of God's ways in Christ. The story of the Good Samaritan *is* the story of God's way to the cross in Christ, God's turning of the world to himself on Calvary, and if in order to push that essential point seriously, we say playfully that "The *beast* is the flesh in which he deigned to come to us. The *being set upon the beast* is belief in the Incarnation of Christ," so be it.

On the other hand, alongside my plea for taking this Augustinian

ambition seriously, I have a second plea, a plea for reserve. I have a plea for what has recently been deprecatingly called the “ploddingly exegetical.”⁶ And it may be that the critics and commentators who deride Augustine’s allegorical interpretation will be a great resource here, as a constant reminder of the intractable historical messiness of the parable which we would too easily magic away, and to which we must constantly return. If, in one breath, we can say that “the *beast* is the flesh in which he deigned to come to us,” with the other we must be ready to say, “Hang on a moment; that isn’t quite right; let’s read that again.” We must allow ourselves to be tripped up by the particular configuration of difficult things which we find in this text.

On the one hand; on the other—I can offer no formula for the integration of these two necessary moments this side of the eschaton.

The rhythm of practice that I am proposing—the rhythm of reserve and ambition linked to a dialectic of opacity and transparency—has an application far wider than the interpretation of parables alone, I think. I suggest (and it is no more than a suggestion) that there is a similar structure, a “figural structure,” to Christian life in general: a structure based on our adoption and creation’s adoption into union with God in Christ. The rhythm of transparency and opacity is a rhythm in which we constantly strive to make sense, to discover how it is that we can and should live in response to Christ’s overwhelming impact, and yet equally constantly find our sense-making interrupted and disrupted, and find that the details, the particulars, upset our too-easy generalizations.

Augustine’s allegorical exegesis teaches us to be bold and daring in our appropriation of the gospel: to hunt out connections and meanings at constant risk of trespassing beyond sober scholarship’s bounds. It teaches us to be bold in making Christian sense, in taking every thought and word and narrative detail captive in Christ’s train. The same exegesis also teaches us, however, to practice this boldness with a certain humility and reserve, ready always to be called to account for what we say and do; ready always to be opened up to judgment and set on a different path; ready always to have the irritating grit of the texts we are trying to read interrupt our smooth constructions. We need a humble boldness, a serious playfulness, a reserved ambition.

⁶ John Milbank, Graham Ward, and Catherine Pickstock, “Suspending the Material: The Turn of Radical Orthodoxy” in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (London: Routledge, 1998), 2, describing “Barthianism.”

And perhaps we can learn that strange mixture of boldness and reserve in part by reading *both* the familiar critics of allegory and eise-
gesis, who call us again and again to the rough surface of the text, *and*
those earlier makers of Christian sense, banished by our sobriety,
whose boldness the critics distrust.