

The Hermeneutics of Augustine

Augustine's Abandonment of Premillennialism

Augustine of Hippo (354-430) is often referred to as St. Augustine or Augustine Bishop of Hippo. Besides the apostles, he is considered by many to be the most influential theologian in Church history. Both Roman Catholics and Protestants look to the writings of Augustine to justify many of their theological opinions.

Augustine was greatly influenced by the writings of the Greek philosophers. These philosophers used an allegorical method of interpretation to explain away some of the unsavory exploits of the Greek gods. Both Origen and Augustine adopted this method of interpretation and applied it to the Scriptures.

The early church Fathers who lived in the era after the apostles were largely premillennial. They looked for Christ's physical return to earth to establish His Millennial Kingdom. In his early writings, Augustine was also premillennial. Later in his life, he changed his view regarding a literal Millennial Kingdom. As a result, he formulated the view which is known today as amillennialism. Several factors led him to this divergent theory about the millennium.

The Greek philosophers considered the physical world to be inherently evil. Therefore, Augustine reasoned that the Millennial Kingdom could not be physical in nature. It had to be spiritual instead. Rather than Christ ruling from the throne of David in Jerusalem in an earthly kingdom, He now rules in the hearts of Christians.

Augustine also rejected the premillennial view because of his deep-seated anti-Semitic mindset. The early church was vigorously persecuted by the Jews. Because of this intense persecution, many in the early church had a strong dislike for the Jewish people and Augustine was no exception. He could not fathom an earthly reign of Jesus Christ over a world in which the nation of Israel would once again play a significant role. By using allegorical interpretation, Augustine was able to take the unconditional promises given to Israel about an earthly kingdom and apply them spiritually to the church. Allegorical interpretation allowed Augustine to avoid the plain teaching of Scripture regarding the literal thousand-year reign of Jesus Christ on earth. Augustine's amillennial view was the

result of his adopting the allegorical method of interpretation of the Greek philosophers as well as his own warped prejudice against the Jewish people.

When a person sees a loose thread on a piece of cloth, they will often pull it thinking that they can fix the problem. Unfortunately, what often happens is that the cloth begins to unravel creating a bigger problem. This is a good illustration of what happened when Augustine changed from premillennialism to amillennialism. When he changed his view of eschatology (the doctrine of end times), his teaching on soteriology (the doctrine of salvation) also changed.

Matthew chapter 24 is about the tribulation period before Christ returns to establish His Millennial Kingdom. Believers will suffer much persecution during this time. This is the context for verse 13 which reads “But he who endures to the end shall be saved.” Clearly, this verse is speaking about believers who survive this persecution during the tribulation. This verse has nothing to do with eternal salvation and everything to do with being physically saved from persecution. The Holman Christian Standard Bible translates verse 13 as: “But the one who endures to the end will be delivered.”

In Augustine’s early writings, he understood the meaning of “saved” in the Olivet Discourse to refer to physical salvation. But when Augustine changed his view of premillennialism to amillennialism, he reinterpreted this verse to be about eternal salvation, rather than believers being delivered from persecution during the tribulation.

David Anderson correctly notes:

[Augustine’s] change in eschatology from premillennialism to amillennialism caused significant changes in his soteriology, especially in the area of perseverance of the saints. Specifically, his reinterpretation of Matt 24:13 (“he who endures to the end will be saved”) as a spiritual salvation instead of a physical salvation (to enter and populate the Millennium) caused drastic changes in his soteriology. Perseverance of the saints (faithfulness until the end of one’s physical life) became the *sine qua non* [the core or foundation] of his soteriology.

One could believe in Christ, have the fruit of the elect, but prove he was not elect if he should not persevere in faithfulness until the end of his physical life.¹

When Augustine abandoned the literal (plain or normal) interpretation of Scripture, he also abandoned the teachings of grace. He taught that assurance of salvation was impossible without a lifetime of good works.

Some people think that correct teaching on eschatology is really not all that important. They do not realize how interrelated areas of doctrine are. When you pull on the thread of eschatology, you have no idea what kind of a mess you might end up with as other fundamental doctrines begin to come unraveled.

Augustine's Guidelines for Interpretation

Augustine had many problems in the area of hermeneutics which led him to numerous faulty conclusions. Nevertheless, he did develop some sound principles for studying the Word of God. Unfortunately, not all of his principles were sound, and he was guilty of violating those that were sound.

Bernard Ramm summarized Augustine's guidelines for Bible interpretation:

- A genuine Christian faith was necessary for the understanding of the Scriptures.
- Although the literal and historical are not the end of Scripture, we must hold them in high regard.
- Scripture has more than one meaning and therefore the allegorical method is proper.
- The task of the expositor is to derive meaning from the Bible, not bring meaning to it. The expositor is to express accurately the thoughts of the writer.
- The analogy of faith, the true orthodox creed, must be consulted when interpreting. If orthodoxy represents Scripture, then no expositor can interpret Scripture contrary to orthodoxy.
- No verse is to be studied as a unit in itself. The context of the verse must be noted, i.e., what the Bible says on the same subject somewhere else.
- If an interpretation is uncertain, nothing in the passage can be made a matter of orthodox faith.

¹ Anderson, David. THE SOTERIOLOGICAL IMPACT OF AUGUSTINE'S CHANGE FROM PREMILLENNIALISM TO AMILLENNIALISM PART TWO. <https://faithalone.org/journal/2002ii/anderson.pdf> (accessed March 8, 2018).

- The Holy Spirit cannot substitute for the necessary learning to understand Scripture. The able interpreter must know Hebrew, Greek, geography, natural history, music, chronology, numbers, history, dialectics, natural science, and the ancient philosophers.
- The obscure passage must yield to the clear passage.
- No Scripture is to be interpreted so as to conflict with any other—the harmony of revelation.²

Let's evaluate these principles to determine which are sound and which should be avoided.

Augustine was correct when he stated that “a genuine Christian faith is necessary for the understanding of the Scriptures.” The apostle Paul wrote, “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned (1 Cor. 2:14).” The natural man refers to unbelievers who do not have the Holy Spirit living within them. Unbelievers cannot accept what God has revealed because they do not have the indwelling Spirit of God. Unbelievers can understand the gospel as the Holy Spirit illuminates their understanding. Paul did not mean that unbelievers are incapable of understanding everything written in the Word of God. Mark Twain once said, “It ain't those parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand.” Although he was not a believer, he understood enough to know that if the Bible was true then he was in big trouble.

Augustine did not totally reject literal, historical-grammatical interpretation. He just was not consistent in applying it to all parts of God's Word. He was on the right track when he said that we must hold the literal and historical method of interpretation in high regard. But like so many others, he did not own them as the only valid means of interpretation.

Augustine was absolutely incorrect in saying, “Scripture has more than one meaning and therefore the allegorical method is proper.” The allegorical method of interpretation is not proper. Augustine violated the single sense of Scripture which is an element of the literal, historical-grammatical method of interpretation.

Augustine correctly noted that “the task of the expositor is to derive meaning from the Bible, not bring meaning to it. The expositor is to express accurately the thoughts of the

² Ramm, Protestant Biblical Interpretation, 36-37.

writer.” Deriving meaning from the text (exegesis) is our goal as we study God’s Word. Bringing our own preconceived ideas to the text (eisegesis) can only result in a faulty interpretation. Unfortunately, many of us are guilty of forcing our own ideas into the written text of God’s Word. This is exactly what Augustine did when he made Matthew 24:13 about eternal salvation rather than deliverance from persecution during the tribulation.

Augustine correctly stated that “the analogy of faith ... must be consulted when interpreting.” The *analogy of faith* and the *analogy of scripture* are two related hermeneutical principles which are key for correctly interpreting God’s Word. The *analogy of scripture* states that Scripture interprets Scripture. The *analogy of faith* states that all passages of Scripture agree and do not contradict each other. The term “faith” refers to the whole body of doctrine as taught in God’s Word. Therefore, a passage of Scripture cannot contradict other passages of Scripture.

These two principles lay the ground work for the following correct guidelines:

- No verse is to be studied as a unit in itself. The context of the verse must be noted, i.e., what the Bible says on the same subject somewhere else.
- If an interpretation is uncertain, nothing in the passage can be made a matter of orthodox faith.
- The obscure passage must yield to the clear passage.
- No Scripture is to be interpreted so as to conflict with any other.

Finally, Augustine proposed some worthy goals when he stated: “The Holy Spirit cannot substitute for the necessary learning to understand Scripture. The able interpreter must know Hebrew, Greek, geography, natural history...” Sadly, this was another principle in which Augustine fell short.

The “Church Fathers” are often grouped into those who spoke Latin and those who spoke Greek. Augustine was one of the Latin Fathers. His understanding of the Koine Greek of the New Testament was inferior compared to the Fathers who actually spoke the Greek language. Because of this, he misunderstood the concept of justification as explained by the apostle Paul in the New Testament.

Dave Anderson explains:

Augustine's scant knowledge of Greek caused him to misunderstand *dikaioō* translating it in its present infinitive form, "to *make* righteous," as opposed to the defining truth of the Reformers that this word meant "to *declare* righteous." The distinction was enough to cause schism in Western Christianity. Whereas the former meaning signified a change of *character*, the latter meaning referred to a change of *standing*. "To make righteous" looked to one's experience in life, but "to declare righteous" looked to the court room of heaven. The temporal significance of the distinction in meanings was monumental. Augustine saw justification (the making of righteous character) as a life-long effort, whereas Luther understood that one could be "declared righteous" in God's court at a moment in time.

The Roman Catholic doctrine of justification carries with it the idea of "make righteous." The result is a life-time effort of working for salvation without any hope of assurance of going to heaven. Sadly, the doctrine of the *perseverance of the saints*, as taught by many Calvinists, mirrors Roman Catholics in their struggles to "prove" that they are among the elect without any genuine assurance of salvation.

It's been said that "politics makes strange bedfellows." The same could be said of theology. It is indeed ironic that both Roman Catholics and Calvinistic Protestants find themselves together in the same bed of insecurity. How is it that both lack assurance of salvation? At the beginning of this chapter we said, "Both Roman Catholics and Protestants look to the writings of Augustine to justify many of their theological opinions."

The writings of Augustine have influenced many throughout the annals of church history. It seems that many theologians have embraced Augustine's own lack of assurance of salvation.

When Augustine reinterpreted Matthew 24:13, perseverance became the essence of eternal salvation. If perseverance is a requirement for salvation, then no one can know that they are truly saved until they have actually persevered to the end of their life. Augustine taught that it was impossible for anyone to know for sure that they were saved and on their way to heaven.

In fact, Augustine taught that a person can genuinely believe in Christ, but not be elect. He wrote: “It is, indeed, to be wondered at, and greatly to be wondered at, that to some of His own children—whom He has regenerated in Christ—to whom He has given faith, hope, and love, God does not give perseverance also ...”³ “Some are regenerated, but not elect, since they do not persevere ...”⁴ According to Augustine, a person can be regenerated and genuinely believe in Christ, yet not be elect. This teaching is not the same as the Arminian doctrine of losing your salvation. For Augustine, lack of perseverance means that you were never saved to begin with even though you truly believed in Christ and were regenerated.

For Augustine, the only way for a believer to prove their election was to persevere in their faith to the end of their physical life on earth. And even though a person might be persevering today, that is no guarantee that they might not fall away tomorrow. This falling away would prove that this former believer was never elect to begin with. Therefore, any assurance gained from righteous living was simply a false assurance. Augustine taught that perseverance was a gift from God. And no one could possibly have this gift of perseverance until they had died. Augustine wrote, “Therefore it is uncertain whether any one has received this gift so long as he is still alive. For if he fall before he dies, he is, of course, said not to have persevered; and most truly is it said. How, then, should he be said to have received or to have had perseverance who has not persevered?”⁵

Conclusion

Sound doctrine can only come about through following proper hermeneutical principles. Augustine had some things right. Unfortunately, he did not always follow sound principles of hermeneutics. And his unsound principles led him into serious error.

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³ Augustine, *On Rebuke and Grace*, 5.18.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.17.

⁵ Augustine, *On the Gift of Perseverance*, 5.1.