

AUGUSTINE AND THE CATHOLIC “FORM” OF SCRIPTURE

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“[T]o deny the referential potential of human words could only be a reflection of some form of Arianism grounded in a prior denial of the Son’s ability to refer to the Father.”



INTRODUCTION

St. Augustine’s hermeneutics, semiotics, and epistemology in general have enjoyed no lack of attention in recent years, due not least to the frequently noted modern and postmodern preoccupation with method and technique in securing definitions of knowledge. In this regard, *De doctrina Christiana*, Augustine’s famous work on biblical interpretation, has been treated from nearly every conceivable angle.¹ Notably absent

1. To note just a few of the recent contributions with which I will interact below: R. A. Marcus, “St. Augustine on Signs,” *Phronesis* 2 (1957): 60–83; Rowan Williams, “Language, Reality and Desire in Augustine’s *De doctrina*,” *Journal of Literature and Theology* 3, no. 2 (1989): 138–50; Duane Arnold and Pamela Bright, eds., *De doctrina Christiana: A Classic of Western Culture* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1995); John Deeley, *Augustine and Poinsett: The Protosemiotic Development* (Scranton, PA: Scranton University Press,

from this literature, however, is any treatment of Augustine's own theological account of what Scripture is as an object in its own right—his doctrine of Scripture.² This is surprising, given that it is hard to find a page of his work in which *divina scriptura*, *divinus sermo*, *divina eloquia*, or some such locution, is not invoked. The purpose of this essay is to begin to fill this lacuna in a limited but crucial way by arguing that, for Augustine, Scripture has a Catholic nature as part of its substantial form, species, or essence—as its “what-ness.” This is so not least because it is part of the sign-system that the Catholic Church is, and thus it participates in the metaphysical form “Catholic.” When the mind perceives Scripture, it encounters not a fluid and unordered mass of signs that must be given some definite meaning by the reader but the truth of the Catholic faith. This, I suggest, is what makes it possible for Augustine to make the striking statement that “Scriptura non asserit nisi Catholicam fidem” (Scripture asserts nothing but the Catholic faith) (*De doctrina* 3.10.14).

He makes this claim in the course of an extended argument in *De doctrina* 3, precisely about the problem of the diversity of interpretation: heretics, schismatics, pagans, and even sinners within the Church, he notes, all seem to find warrant in the text of Scripture for their own positions. It could appear, therefore, that the Catholic position is just one of many interpretive

2009); Phillip Cary, *External Signs: The Powerlessness of External Things in Augustine's Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Edward Morgan, *The Incarnation of the Word: The Theology of Language of Saint Augustine of Hippo* (New York: T&T Clark, 2010); Susannah Ticciati, *A New Apophaticism: Augustine and the Redemption of Signs* (Boston: Brill, 2015).

2. The distinction between a “doctrine of Scripture” or a “theory of inspiration,” on the one hand, and “hermeneutics,” on the other hand, is of course largely a recent, post-Reformation phenomenon (though no less useful for that reason). For some of the history, see Francis Watson, “Hermeneutics and Doctrine of Scripture: Why They Need Each Other,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 12, no. 2 (2010); and Denis Farkasfalvy, O.Cist., *Inspiration and Interpretation: A Theological Introduction to Sacred Scripture* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010). Regarding Augustine, there are a few older studies that treat his understanding of “inspiration,” by which they mean the relationship between the divine inspiration of the biblical authors and their own free will. See A. D. Polman, *The Word of God According to St. Augustine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955); C. Douais, *Saint Augustin et la Bible* (Paris: Revue Biblique, 1893); Charles Joseph Costello, *St. Augustine's Doctrine on the Inspiration and Canonicity of Scripture* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1930).

stances equally guilty of using the text to suit its own claims. To answer this, Augustine discusses how to know whether ambiguous words of Scripture are to be read literally or figuratively. The force, he says, of sinful habits, as well as common cultural opinions, often produces an interpretation contrary to either the morals or the faith of the Church. Yet,

Scripture commands nothing except charity, and condemns nothing except concupiscence, and in that way forms [*informat*] the habits of men. Likewise, if an erroneous opinion has occupied the soul, men think that whatever Scripture might assert contrary to this must be figurative. But Scripture asserts nothing but the Catholic faith, in regard to things past, future, and present. It is a narrative of the past, a foretelling of the future, and a description of the present. (*De doctrina* 3.10.14)

Against both moral and doctrinal errors (examples of which he gives in book three), he recommends interpreting Scripture according to the rule of faith and charity. But does this not simply further beg the question? Obviously, Augustine thinks there can be no discrepancy between Scripture and the Church, but what makes this more than a mere assertion of authority in the face of other seemingly equally arbitrary claims to different sources of authority? Is there anything more to his claim in *De doctrina* other than bold counter-assertion?

To try to understand Augustine's answer more fully, this essay undertakes a sort of conceptual archeology, seeking to understand the place Scripture must occupy in his thought for him to say that it "asserts nothing but the Catholic faith." By using a range of texts from elsewhere in his corpus, I attempt to unearth the theological scaffolding that makes this claim both intelligible and profound. Paying attention to the unstated nuances of what he says in *De doctrina* reveals just how inherently theological and, to the disappointment of many semioticians of Scripture today, inextricably metaphysical, his view of Scripture is. In particular, I suggest that, for Augustine, Scripture and the Church participate in a common substantial form or essence, the *forma servi*, which is Catholic. To apprehend either one is to apprehend the *forma servi*—the Catholic body—and therefore any discrepancy between the two can only ever be apparent. The Catholic form of Scripture is an entailment of the divine condescension from

the eternal “form of God” (*forma Dei*) to the incarnate “form of a slave” (*forma servi*) to the ecclesial *forma* of the body of Christ, which is Catholic. The concern, evident in *De doctrina*, to provide the reader with a Catholic formation in charity, then, is not for the sake of a reading subject who can give Scripture a shape it does not otherwise have, but to create a subject more adequate to its object.

In the end, I suggest that attention to the Catholic form of Scripture substantiates the oft-noted connection in Augustine between the *Verbum Dei*, Christ, and the *verba Dei*, Scripture, and that this ecclesial link—that the Scriptures belong to the Catholic Church—further grounds his exegetical methods. But there are also contemporary theological issues at stake in all of this. Most importantly, Augustine’s account of Scripture reveals the dearth of attention to ecclesiological distinctives in many modern approaches to Scripture, including in those that fall under the rubric of “theological interpretation.” In particular, I suggest that Augustine’s inextricably Catholic metaphysics of Scripture is an embodiment of the fact that every particular approach to Scripture always implies an account of what Scripture is, and therefore cannot help but be implicated in contentious theological claims about its place in the ecclesiological landscape. In other words, Augustine reminds us that reading Scripture will always imply a doctrine of Scripture, and a doctrine of Scripture will always imply an ecclesiology that will compete with other ecclesiologies. Thus Augustine’s account suggests that a particularly Catholic theological interpretation has a stake in articulating the Church’s unique relation to Scripture, not just as an object that she uses to do theology but as a constitutive part of Catholicism itself.

This account of Augustine’s doctrine of Scripture stands contrary to the work of several recent and influential interpreters of Augustine’s approach to Scripture, and, by implication, his theory of knowledge in general. Without attempting anything like a comprehensive review of these approaches, I briefly position my thesis among three influential contemporary representatives. Importantly, each of these approaches owes a great deal to so-called postmodern hermeneutics of a broadly Derridean or post-structuralist pedigree that either delimit or entirely deny the ability of texts, and Scripture in particular, to refer to, or signify, nontextual objects or thoughts. Such a non-Platonic philosophical position

is (strangely) often either ascribed to, or sourced in, *De doctrina*, and for at least two reasons. The first is that *De doctrina* is arguably responsible for the propagation, if not invention, of a sign-based epistemology so influential throughout Western history, which, one could say, finds its logical end in such nonreferential positions. The second and related reason is that *De doctrina* strongly emphasizes the virtue of charity as both the means and goal of valid interpretation, which seems to be fully congruous with today's emphasis on the primacy of the subject in the construction and interpretation of texts. The two impetuses are obviously related but were ostensibly brought together for the first time in *De doctrina*: if signs, and scriptural signs in particular, do not refer very determinately, or even not at all, the reader will ultimately have to make a text mean something rather than find meaning in it.³ I will refer to this class of approaches below as "hermeneutic," since they tend to foreground the role of the interpreter, rather than the text, in reading Scripture.

We could take the influential work of Rowan Williams as representative of this position.⁴ According to his understanding of Augustine, the world in which we live is a world entirely made up of signs that have no intrinsically intelligible referent. "God alone is the end of desire; and that entails that there is no finality, no 'closure,' no settled or intrinsic meaning in the world we inhabit," which is the "shifting, mobile realm of representation, non-finality, growing and learning, . . . and therefore has no meaning in itself."⁵ The solution to this meaninglessness is Christ, whose acts are the unique *signum* of God's speech. This is true enough as far as it goes, but Williams goes on: for Augustine, in this world of flux Christ is able to be the one sign that is unmistakable and thus able to teach us that the rest of the world

3. On some of these approaches see, e.g., Cyril O'Regan, "De doctrina Christiana and Modern Hermeneutics," in *De doctrina Christiana: A Classic of Western Culture*, 217–36.

4. See Williams, "Language, Reality and Desire in Augustine's *De doctrina*."

5. *Ibid.*, 141. Such post-structuralist phraseology occurs throughout the piece. E.g., "Language is not a set of discrete acts of unsuccessful naming any more than it is a set of discrete acts of successful naming. 'Success' in our discourse is the skill of *continuing with* the shifts of interconnecting perceptions that material history and relationship produce" (*ibid.*, 148, emphasis original).

(of signs) is also “uttered” by God. Christ, then, for Augustine, “is the *difference* of God,” and Scripture is a sort of “primary derivative from the work of Christ.”⁶ As such, it is to be interpreted in the light of Christ crucified, not for “clear metaphysical knowledge” or “simply for ‘play,’ but for the formation of *caritas*.”⁷ This position, as we will see, is quite right (and seminal) so) about several important movements within *De doctrina*, and yet it is fatally wrong about Augustine in several other crucial ways. In particular, Williams’s view of Scripture as an otherwise meaningless set of signs only given meaning by the interpreter in the light of Christ must give place to Augustine’s account of a world, including Scripture, with meanings stable enough to be intelligible, even though they are always ultimately “sacramental” and lead the mind precisely through that intelligibility to the one true God.

Second, Susannah Ticciati’s *A New Apophaticism* is a careful, meticulously argued, and creative recasting of the basic philosophical possibilities available to the hermeneutic position, which (perhaps predictably) fails to give any account of Augustine’s view of Scripture as an object. Emphasizing Augustine’s various hesitations to say how far words can refer to God, she argues that the role of Scripture is not to refer to divine things at all but to transform its reader who, by his whole life, makes a sort of noncognitive reference to God. For Ticciati, only *people* refer to God “directly” (and never linguistically but only ethically—by their behavior), and Scripture’s words refer to God only through the transformation effected in its readers. This is a rather ingenious combination of the two features noted above, common to both *De doctrina* and contemporary hermeneutics. By contrast, however, we will see below that it is the way Scripture’s Catholic form participates in, and reflects, the *forma Dei* that allows Scripture to refer the mind to divine truth. For Augustine, therefore, intellectually grasping—and cognitively apprehending—divine truth as revealed in Scripture, and not just noncognitively reflecting it in our behavior toward others, is constitutive of human transformation.

Finally, I note Phillip Cary’s *Outward Signs*, which has notoriously advanced the position that Augustine’s “expressivist

6. *Ibid.*, 144 (emphasis original); see also *ibid.*, 141.

7. *Ibid.*, 148, 146.

semiotics" is an incoherent position. According to Cary's interpretation, there is no way that external things like signs can ever refer to the fundamentally important inner realm of the soul, thought, and grace the way that Augustine assumes it can—nor does he think Augustine ever gives an adequate account of how this could be so.⁸ In Cary's view, Scripture can only be a set of ultimately impotent signs that stand in an inexplicable relationship to the world of internal and eternal realities.⁹ As such, Augustine's Platonism distracts the proper locus of meaning from the external, material sign itself to the primacy of internal states, presences, and immaterial thought, and it has constructed a logically unbridgeable gap that inhibits any coherent account of the nature and function of Scripture.¹⁰ Yet Cary's fatal assumption seems to be that Scripture can only exist as a set of signs that is pure, mute, material extension, which could never reach the internal world Augustine mistakenly thinks is so important. On the contrary, I argue below that it is precisely the same Platonic Christianity that grounds and drives his account of Scripture as having both a material reality and a corresponding, and inseparable, internal or inhering intelligibility in its metaphysical form. Cary appears to see Augustine's account of Scripture as pure *res extensa*, whereas for Augustine it is also a *res intelligenda*.

The remainder of this essay proceeds as follows. In part one, I lay out what I take to be a fairly uncontroversial reading of Scripture's place in *De doctrina* in order to foreground the claim that, for Augustine, Scripture is part of the sign-system that the

8. Phillip Cary says, "I should say that I do not believe in inner, intuitive, or phenomenal presence, just as I do not believe in Platonist souls or Augustinian inner selves. Except when I suspend disbelief and enter imaginatively into what seems to me the hallucinatory world of modern thinkers such as Schleiermacher or Husserl, I just cannot see why anyone would be very interested in what is present in our conscious experience. Consciousness itself, if there is such a thing, is of interest only insofar as it is directed to what is outside itself. . . . Still, it will be useful for those interested in these things to know that I think Derrida in particular gets the history of the metaphysics of presence wrong by focusing on speech as the purported locus of presence. Here Augustine affords us much superior instruction in the meaning of metaphysics" (*Outward Signs: The Powerlessness of External Things in Augustine's Thought* [New York: Oxford, 2008], xv–xvi).

9. *Ibid.*, 103–05, 133 *passim*.

10. *Ibid.*, 88.

Catholic Church is, which is itself part of the broader sign-system of what he calls the *dispensatio temporalis*. In part two, I focus largely on *De Trinitate* to sketch the outlines of Augustine's broader theological-metaphysical account of the way words signify, an account that is inseparably bound to the economy of salvation. Specifically, we will see that for Augustine the intelligibility of the Church's sign-system outlined in part one is grounded, like all intelligibility, in its substantial form. In the Catholic Church's case, this form is directly linked, in the economy of salvation, to the *forma Dei* in the Incarnation through the *forma servi*. Finally, in part three, we will turn to Augustine's account of Scripture in the *Enarrationes in Psalmos* to show that, both exegetically and theologically, there is good reason to think that Scripture asserts nothing but the Catholic faith, Augustine claims, since, as part of the Church's sign-system, it participates in the substantial form that is Catholic.

I. SCRIPTURE IN THE *DISPENSATIO TEMPORALIS*

Augustine's account of Scripture in *De doctrina* makes it firmly and inextricably a part of the Catholic Church. The broadest context of his discussion is given in the preface, where he is concerned that some have said they do not need a human teacher to learn from Scripture. Their own minds, and especially their abundant supply of the Holy Spirit, give them all they need.¹¹ Augustine replies, insisting on the importance of human teaching and that of the Church in particular, that they are not as independent as they claim, and that in reading Scripture they actually already take many things for granted that they have learned only on the basis of teaching authority, such as being able to read in the first place.¹² As such, their own interpretations of Scripture are always already informed by a teacher of some sort. This is important, since he is about to teach about interpreting Scripture on the basis of the authority he has as a bishop of the Catholic Church.¹³ If one does not need the Church to teach one how to

11. Augustine, *De doctrina*, preface, 4.

12. *Ibid.*, preface, 5.

13. *Ibid.*, preface, 1: "Sunt praecepta quaedam tractandarum Scripturarum, quae studiosis earum video non incommode posse tradi."

read Scripture rightly, he continues, at the end of the day these Spirit-filled readers will not have any use for going to Church at all, and he predicts they will stop going.¹⁴ For the Scriptures, just like prebaptismal catechesis or the sacraments themselves, are administered by the Church's human agents, and never apart from them. The Church provides instruction for reading Scripture because Scripture is ecclesial—it is part of the Catholic Church.

If the Catholic Church provides the frame for Scripture, the Church herself is framed in turn by what Augustine calls the *dispensatio temporalis*, which we may translate either simply as temporal dispensation, or, taking a cue from Hill's translation, as temporal regime.¹⁵ The phrase encompasses all the saving work of the Trinity in human history, including the revelatory function of creation, everything contained in the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the present age of the Church.¹⁶ In *De doctrina* Augustine describes this regime in terms of his two famous distinctions between *signum/res* and *uti/frui*. By mapping these two distinctions onto one another, Augustine is making the point that signs are used, but things are enjoyed.¹⁷ He is thus

14. *Ibid.*, preface, 5.

15. *Ibid.*, 1.35.39. For "regime," see Augustine, *De Trinitate* 1.8.16 (*The Trinity*, trans. Edmund Hill [Hyde Park, NY: New City Press], 80), where *dispensatio* is found in the phrase *dispensatio similitudinum*, which I treat below in detail. Other synonymous phrases include *ordo temporum* (*De Trinitate* 2.5.9) and *dispensatio temporibus congrua* (*ibid.*, 3.9.22). Translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

16. Augustine, *De doctrina* 1.35.39: "Hoc ergo ut nossemus atque possemus, facta est tota pro nostra salute per divinam providentiam dispensatio temporalis qua debemus uti, non quasi mansoria quadam dilectione et delectatione, sed transitoria potius tamquam viae, tamquam vehiculorum vel aliorum quorumlibet instrumentorum, aut si quid congruentius dici potest; ut ea quibus ferimur propter illud ad quod ferimur diligamus." See also Augustine, *De fide et simbolo* 4.6, where it appears to refer more narrowly to the Incarnation.

17. Susannah Ticciati has recently said that Augustine does not explicitly link the two distinctions and map them onto one another, as I will argue below. She suggests that Williams was the first to do so (Williams, "Language, Reality and Desire in Augustine's *De doctrina*," 139). While it is true that the *uti/frui* distinction is in the forefront in book one, there are unmistakable verbal repetitions of the *signum/res* distinction, especially as incorporated into the journey metaphor, throughout the chapter, which make this position impossible. The intentionality of the overlay of these distinctions is also verbally explicit in *De doctrina* 3.7.9 and 3.9.13, where signs are explicitly referred to as *utile*. Thus Williams, contra Ticciati, is right that this overlay "pervades the

beginning to give an account of Scripture by saying that its signs are to be used for the sake of getting to the Trinity, who alone should really be enjoyed for its own sake. It is worth quoting the famous journey metaphor, because it is one of Augustine's favorites, and he uses it variously in many places throughout *De doctrina* and his entire corpus. But here it is perhaps most explicitly set out:

Suppose, then, we were foreigners in a strange country, and could not live happily except in our *patria*, and that we were miserable as foreigners, and, desiring to put an end to our misery, determined to return home. We find, however, that we must make use of some mode of conveyance, either by land or water, in order to reach that *patria* where our enjoyment is to commence. But the beauty of the country through which we pass, and the very pleasure of the motion delight us, and turning these things which we ought to use into objects of enjoyment, we become unwilling to hasten the end of our journey; and, becoming engrossed by a perverse sweetness, our thoughts are diverted from that *patria* whose delights would make us truly happy. In this way we are foreigners far from God in the life of this mortality. If we wish to return to the *patria*, this world must be used, not enjoyed, that so the invisible things of God may be clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made—that is, that by means of what is material and temporary we may lay hold upon that which is spiritual and eternal.¹⁸

Into this metaphor (drawn, of course, from a fusion of Platonism with the parable of the prodigal son) are aggregated a variety of common Augustinian themes, each of which he explicates in more detail elsewhere in his corpus.¹⁹ Among these are the utility and thoroughly symbolic nature of the temporal world God has ordered to our happiness. The majority of the first book of

whole,” and not just implicitly. What is true, as Augustine says in *De doctrina* 1.40.44, 2.1.1, and 3.2.2, is that the focus in book one is on *res* rather than *signa*. Thus, ultimately, “the true *res fruendum* is the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit” (*De doctrina* 1.5.5). This does not mean, of course, that there are not other *res* to which divine *signa* point.

18. Augustine, *De doctrina* 1.4.4.

19. See, e.g., Augustine, *De Trinitate* 1.1.3, 1.3.5, 4.1.2, 4.9, 8.7.11, 10.3.5 *passim*.

De doctrina teases out some of the nuances of how this symbolism works, with an eye to the difference it will make in the reading of Scripture. But before he comes back to Scripture, his division of the whole world into signs-to-be-used and things-to-be-enjoyed (with various nuances) has allowed him to conceptualize the whole *dispensatio temporalis*, including the Incarnation itself, in terms of outward signs.

The point of the temporal regime, including the Incarnation, then, is to use signs to draw our minds, which have become attached, as he often says, to *temporalia* and *corporalia*, back to the contemplation of the eternal, unchanging truth that is the Trinity. As it is, we have become lost among some of the signs that we were supposed to use to get to that contemplation. Enjoying the sights rather than using them, we forgot that the world is only a path of signposts or landmarks on a journey somewhere else. We have replaced things with signs, enjoyed what we should be using, and so we are not enjoying the one we should enjoy for itself, to which all the signs point, if read rightly.

Thus the *dispensatio temporalis*, which frames the Church and in turn frames Scripture, is characterized primarily by the Trinity's use of the corporeal world, including human beings, to draw our minds to the one who is truly incorporeal. As I mentioned, the regime of signs (as it might be called in *De doctrina*) can be variously divided up. The first part is the creation itself, by which even pagans (and especially those pagans who have been most successful at it—the Platonic philosophers) might discern the supremacy of the Creator (as in Rom 1:20). The second part is the specific set of revealed signs given in the Old Testament to Israel, which, Augustine says, gives them a particularly privileged vantage compared to the pagans.²⁰ But the regime's climactic point, to which all its other parts point, is the Incarnation. Here wisdom itself, Augustine's favorite way to synonymize the eternal Word, enters the temporal dispensation: the thing becomes a sign.²¹ On our journey home, we had become stuck on the signposts and had to get back on our way.

20. For this twofold division, see Augustine, *De doctrina* 3.6.10–9.13.

21. This is the stronger way I would describe it against Williams's weaker claim that God "has himself provided a *signum* in the Word made flesh" ("Language, Reality and Desire in Augustine's *De doctrina*," 140).

But of this we should have been wholly incapable, had not Wisdom condescended to adapt himself to our weakness, and to show us an *exemplum* of living not other than as a human since we ourselves are human . . . And thus, though Wisdom was himself our *patria*, he made himself also the way by which we should reach that *patria*. And though he is everywhere present to the inner eye when it is sound and clear, he condescended to make himself manifest to the outward eye of those whose inward sight is weak and dim. . . . Not then in the sense of traversing space, but because he appeared to mortals in mortal flesh, he is said to have come to us.²²

By so doing wisdom became, of course, one of those kinds of signs that should also be considered as a thing, for this sign is also the one thing that can be enjoyed in itself. Having won our attention, and with our gaze now fixed on him, the thing-sign, we are led by this ultimate sign to purify our minds, to move from enjoying signs to using them to know *the* thing.

Yet, as *De doctrina* continues, Augustine is clear that the Incarnation is not the end of the regime of signs, but only its climax. The regime continues in the signs that make up the Church. The Catholic Church is thus a particular system of signs making up one unified, material, intelligible system. In *De doctrina* he does not spell out all his assumptions about how and why this system refers the mind to God, which we will discuss below, but he does bring to light its essential features. Immediately after treating the Incarnation itself, Augustine introduces the Church as the body of Christ. We can surmise he does this because he thinks, as we noted above, that this ecclesial body is the continuing locus of the regime of signs (because it is just Christ's body). He makes this assumption evident later by naming the many signs that are the Church, the system whose primary instances are the sacraments. These are the Church's constitutive signs—those without which the Church cannot be the Church. Therefore he names them as the ones that “apostolic practice” has handed down from the beginning, and also the ones that, in a certain sense, are the “easiest” to interpret and so are most basic to the interpretation

22. Augustine, *De doctrina* 1.11.11–12.12.

of other Church-signs.²³ In other words, these are the Church's chief signs, to which her other signs point, and which refer most obviously and clearly to the Incarnate Word, the chief sign of all. It is also unsurprising that, as Augustine is at pains to say in *De doctrina*, these sacraments have worship as their goal. Besides the Trinity itself, the main *res* at the heart of the first book of *De doctrina* is proper worship, service, or contemplation.²⁴ The redirection of desire, or love, from *corporalia* to the Trinity is the last end of all these signs, and it requires a reorientation of the whole human being, not just our intellect, which is why this redirection includes loving our neighbor as ourselves.²⁵ The dual command to love, Augustine famously argues, is the twin goal of the sign-system the Church is. From the culmination of the temporal regime (the Incarnation) comes the Church, the ecclesial body of Christ, constituted by the signs that the sacraments are.

This, then, is the broad context in which Scripture belongs in Augustine's mind. Scripture is part of the sign-system that the Church is, and it has its own, ultimately subordinate, place therein. It is especially useful, says Augustine, because words are a particularly subtle, agile, accurate, and precise kind of sign.²⁶ They allow us to indicate things, in Scripture's case *the* thing, with a level of detail and nuance that other signs do not. Yet Augustine is also very clear that, for all its usefulness,

23. *Ibid.*, 3.9.13.

24. See *ibid.*, 1.22.20. The theme of worship is in play from the very beginning of book one, in the discussion of the words used to praise the Trinity. See *ibid.*, 1.6.6.

25. Attachment to *corporalia* hinders both love of God and neighbor. In particular, Augustine says in *De Trinitate* 14.17.23 (see also 12.9.14), attachment to *corporalia* is a problem for love of neighbor precisely because such attachment implies the greed that makes us keep from our neighbor those *corporalia* that are rightfully due him. Greed, as the addiction to possessing *corporalia*, is near the root of all evil for Augustine because it both drags the mind down from God to creatures and disrupts love of neighbor by keeping from others what is rightly theirs. The two parts of the dual command to love are connected for Augustine in this way, and therefore to solve one problem is to solve the other: to come to love one's neighbor means to be detached from *corporalia*, to fix the mind on God. This is why Augustine says in *De doctrina* 1.39.43 that if someone loves his neighbor the Scriptures will be unnecessary as a path to the Thing.

26. Augustine, *De doctrina* 2.3.4

Scripture is not necessary to the Church's existence in the same way the sacraments are. As the Incarnation manifested that special sort of sign that is Christ, and as the Church, in a way, continues to be this body-sign, so the sacrament-signs hold a divine power unlike other signs. This is most obviously true in the case of the Eucharist, which is what it signifies.²⁷ The Scriptures, however, are not like this. They may deftly communicate the mysteries of the faith, but they are ultimately unessential. Augustine notes that many, after all, have become saints without them, most obviously those who lived before they became widely available or before the Canon was clearly delineated.²⁸

This frame allows us to see, then, in a preliminary manner, the gist of what Augustine means when he says that "Scripture asserts nothing except the Catholic faith." Scripture is one part of a set of divinely instituted signs, which consist in the cosmos itself, the Old Testament, the Incarnation, the Church, the sacraments, and the New Testament. Scripture proclaims the Catholic faith because it is one part of the sign-system that the Church is. This much we can gather from *De doctrina* itself.

II. THE METAPHYSICS OF REFERENCE

We can deepen and fortify this account of Scripture by giving it its proper metaphysical foundations. This scaffolding plays a supporting role to the main points sketched so far, about which *De doctrina* is primarily concerned. There, however, his discourse harmonizes two apparently disparate theological notes into one tune, and to understand more fully what he says explicitly we will have to understand what he is taking for granted. For the details we turn largely to *De Trinitate*. We will use this work to showcase broadly the way Augustine thinks words refer to their objects—an account usually either dismissed or sidelined by hermeneutic readers—which is particularly important for his view of Scripture. Tracing this account allows us to see more fully the fundamental territory in which Augustine makes the claim

27. See Augustine, *De Trinitate* 3.4.10; see also 3.9.21, 4.3.6.

28. As Augustine says, the Canon was still fluid in his own time (*De doctrina* 2.8.12).

that "Scripture asserts nothing but the Catholic faith" and makes room for our central contention that the Scriptures participate in a *forma* that is Catholic.

Unsurprisingly, the best place to enter the metaphysical foundations of *De doctrina* is its notion of a sign.²⁹ Yet, not least due to the modern preoccupation with semiotics, it is sometimes not appreciated that *signum* is only one of many similar terms that Augustine uses more broadly in his corpus to name those revelatory externals that make up the *dispensatio temporalis*. It is the dominant term in *De doctrina* precisely because there he is concerned with Scripture, which is made up of words. Words, he says, are those sorts of things that we almost never take as things in themselves but rather as signs pointing to something else, and the name *signum* aptly captures this dimension.³⁰ Accordingly, in *De doctrina*, he casts the whole temporal dispensation in these terms. Thus, while the sign's precision marks it particularly among other externals, it functions precisely as *one type* of these externals that populate the temporal dispensation. The sign is one of many sorts of visible and corporeal items Augustine references that make up the temporal dispensation, all of which are designed to lead our mind to the invisible and unchangeable thing. Throughout *De Trinitate*, Augustine categorizes these corporeal items into the genus *similitudines*—"likenesses" or "symbols."³¹ Thus, beside the sign, there are a whole series of other terms for *corporalia* that have a broadly referential function within his metaphysics. These he calls forms, species, figures, types, demonstrations, sights, mediators, models, sacraments, or even images, all of which serve to manifest, instruct, direct, point out, express, signify, demonstrate, preach, announce, admonish, image, draw out, teach, and otherwise present to our sense-obsessed attention

29. We get a glimpse of the variety of these guises in Augustine, *De Trinitate* 4.7.12, where this basic schema is put in terms of the one and the many.

30. Augustine, *De doctrina* 2.1.1.

31. Augustine, *De Trinitate* 1.8.16, 1.10.21, 4.12.15, 12.5.5, 15.9.16, 11.20–21. He comes closest to saying explicitly he is working with the genus of *corporalia* that have various species in *De Trinitate* 3.9.19. He shows this differentiation as well in *De doctrina* 2.16.25: "Ita multis aliis atque aliis numerorum formis quaedam similitudinum in sanctis Libris secreta ponuntur."

the message we could never otherwise see, and so help us to see the Trinity.³²

Thus, it is noteworthy that in *De Trinitate* Augustine uses *dispensatio similitudinum* to refer to that same scheme of salvation that in *De doctrina* he calls the *dispensatio temporalis*—a regime of external signs that point to the Trinity. In a typical passage, he says of Christ,

This sacrament, this sacrifice, this high priest, this God, before he was sent and came, made of a woman—all the sacred and mysterious things that were shown to our fathers in a sacred and mystical way by angelical miracles, or that they themselves performed, were *similitudines* of him, so that all creation might in some way speak the word of the one who was to come and be the savior of all who needed to be recovered from death.³³

De doctrina, then, treats the dispensation under the aspect of signs because Augustine is dealing with Scripture. In *De Trinitate*, on the other hand, Scripture no longer being the primary topic, signs are numbered as but one kind of visible, divinely referential phenomenon.

This, then, is the first point about reference: if in *De doctrina* Scripture is framed by the Church sign-system, which in turn is framed by the *dispensatio temporalis* understood in terms of signs, then his larger corpus reveals that the signs themselves belong to the more general regime of *similitudes*. Furthermore, this regime is a regime of reference: *similitudes* are similar to something to which they refer the mind by means of that likeness. Augustine fuses this regime entirely with the work of Christ—the ultimate *similitude*—so that redemption and cognition are paired

32. Here are just a few apt references to these most common terms drawn from *De Trinitate*. Nouns: *forma* (11.2.3), *species* (2.7.13), *figura* (4.6.10), *demonstrationes* (3.11.27), *visa* (4.1.2), *sacramentum et exemplum* (4.3.6), *mediator* (4.12.15), *imagines* (11.2.3), *manifestatio* (2.17.28). Verbs: *apparere* (1.8.16), *dicere* (1.10.21), *erigere* (1.12.27), *ostendere* (2.5.10), *expremere* (2.5.10), *significare* (2.6.11), *demonstrare* (2.6.11), *praedicare* (3.4.10), *annuntiare* (3.10.19), *admonere* (4.1.2), *imaginari* (10.8.11), *excipere* (4.18.24), and *docere* (13.1.4). These come up in various ways throughout *De doctrina*, but the important point is that the concept underlies the whole.

33. Augustine, *De Trinitate* 4.7.11.

at every point.³⁴ This pairing is obvious in his repeated use of St. Paul's distinction between the *forma Dei* and the *forma servi*. Augustine takes *forma* in these verses to mean substantial form, nature, or essence—in the broad Platonic sense.³⁵ By form, of course, Augustine understands that metaphysical concept that makes unshaped and fluid matter into the particular sort of created thing that it is, and he uses it this way commonly.³⁶ He presses this linguistic connection between the Incarnation and Platonic metaphysics into his own soteriology. Indeed, for him, there is no "connection" that must be made in the first place—the point of the all-encompassing scope of the regime of similitudes is that the divine nature, the nature of the world, and an account of the way the salvation of the world takes place through the Incarnation all belong together. It is no coincidence for him that even the terms—*forma* in this case—arrived at by true philosophy match those of revelation. In the form of God, Christ is that unchangeable substance we have failed to contemplate, the Word who both is and indicates the divine essence. This ultimate form becomes incarnate, becomes something for us to sense—St. Paul's *forma servi*.³⁷ The *forma servi* still retains its nature as the *forma Dei*, and so it can be something in the world with an intelligible, substantial form like everything else (it has its own created nature), and at the same time it can reveal the divine form to our distracted minds and lead us to it.³⁸

34. This is what Lewis Ayres has called Augustine's "christological epistemology." See his *Augustine and the Trinity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 142–70. The whole work, of course, is closely related to our theme.

35. See Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity*, 143–46.

36. See esp. Augustine, *De Genesi ad litteram* 1.4.9–5.10, and *De Genesi contra Manichaeos* 1.5.9, 1.5.12, where he comments on Genesis's statement that "the earth was formless."

37. Augustine, *De Trinitate* 1.7.14: "In forma Dei Verbum per quod facta sunt omnia; in forma autem servi factus ex muliere."

38. In anticipation of our discussion in part three, it is worth noting that Augustine's Christology on this front is thoroughly proto-Chalcedonian, and this is precisely because of the approximate, but not absolute, identity that must exist between the two forms. See Augustine, *De Trinitate* 1.7.14: "Ergo quia forma Dei accepit formam servi, utrumque Deus et utrumque homo; sed utrumque Deus propter accipientem Deum, utrumque autem homo propter acceptum hominem." See also *ibid.*, 13.19.24: "Et cum lego: Verbum caro fac-

Augustine thus introduces the idea of the *dispensatio similitudinum* in the opening pages of *De Trinitate* precisely because the *forma servi* is such a *similitudo*, the one that is uniquely able to refer us to the Father precisely because, as St. Paul puts it, the *forma* is *aequalis Patri*.³⁹ He finds evidence of this in the Incarnate Lord's own words when he says, "I have spoken to you in *similitudinibus*, but the hour will come when I shall speak to you in *similitudinibus* no more" (Jn 16:25), which means, Augustine says, "There will be no more *similitudines* when there is direct vision 'face to face' (1 Cor 13:12)."⁴⁰ Augustine then links these texts immediately to the temporally manifest *forma servi*, who says,

What is meant by "I came forth from the Father," unless this, that "I have not appeared in that *forma* in which I am equal to the Father, but otherwise, that is, as less than the Father, in the creature which I have taken upon me"? And what does it mean that "I have come into this world," unless that "I have shown [*demonstravi*] forth the form of a servant, which I emptied myself to take on, even to the eyes of sinners who love this world"? And what is, "again, I am leaving this world," unless that "I am removing from the sight of those who love the world that which they have seen"? And what is, "I am going to the Father," unless that "I am teaching [*doceo*] in this way that I am an intelligible thing [*intelligendum*] to my faithful as I am equal to the Father"?⁴¹

In this and innumerable passages like it, the created *forma*—which is the uncreated *forma* now perceptible—is playing its usual role of presenting to our mind what a thing really is. The *forma servi* successfully manifests the *forma Dei* precisely by being its *forma*, its intelligible essence; it images the perfect form of which it is an instance. In other words, the *forma Dei* simply

tum est, et habitavit in nobis; in Verbo intellego verum Dei Filium, in carne agnosco verum hominis filium, et utrumque simul in unam personam Dei et hominis ineffabili gratiae largitate coniunctum."

39. Ibid., 1.12.27: "Qui in me credit, non in hoc quod videt credit," ne sit spes nostra in creatura, sed in illo qui suscepit creaturam in qua humanis oculis appareret ac sic ad se aequalem Patri contemplandum per fidem corda mundaret?"

40. Ibid., 1.10.21.

41. Ibid., 1.10.21.

is the Father's mind, and so in the *forma servi* the Son simply is the Father's *doctrina*.⁴²

How, exactly, does this soteriology work? First, Augustine thinks that with our bodily senses we are easily able to perceive the form of a servant, and this produces in the soul's inseparable faculties—intelligence, will, and memory—a corresponding intelligent image, phantasm, or idea of that visible form that is retained for inspection in the memory.⁴³ It is the intelligence's job to judge the truth or falseness of that impression. Once it has ascertained that its senses have not been deceived about the basic nature of the corporeal thing, the mind may assume a judgment about how far the idea or image is true in itself, that is, not compared to the corporeal sensible form in which it was presented—in this case the form of a servant—but to the truth of the eternal form, in this case the *forma Dei*.⁴⁴ Then, our minds have been successfully referred from *corporalia* to the true God, and so begin to participate in him—redemption has gotten underway.

For Augustine, there are two primary ways that any such judgment of truth can be made: on the basis of the natural light of reason working its way up from created things to the one uncreated thing, on the authority of others' judgments (the trust that is faith).⁴⁵ Natural reason, however, does this only with great difficulty, precisely because it is too enamored with temporal things to achieve more than an occasional glimpse of the truth on its own. Because it cannot rightly judge for itself, therefore, it is forced to make this judgment on the basis of authority: by faith. By receiving the form of the servant, though necessarily in corporeal guise, into the mind, and by assenting to it as true, it is led to contemplate and love that corresponding *forma Dei* it does not know by itself, and indeed can only know now dimly by faith.

Augustine gives some examples of how this faith-based judgment works in various places. In *De Trinitate* (8.4.7), for example, he says that when we hear of the Incarnation (since we

42. See *ibid.*, 2.2.4.

43. See *ibid.*, 9.11.16: "Omnis secundum speciem notitia, similis est ei rei quam novit. . . . Habet ergo animus nonnullam speciei notae similitudinem . . . sed non ad aequalitatem similes."

44. *Ibid.*, 8.6.9.

45. See these two ways contrasted in Augustine's *De Trinitate* 8.3.4–4.6.

have not seen it), we are told of a human being, Jesus Christ. We know what a human being is by knowing the human *forma*, which we have gathered by our reason from looking at other human beings, so we know that Jesus Christ was one of those forms. What we do not know, and what we want to know, is who God is. We are then told that this Jesus Christ who was a man should also be embraced by the mind as God. And this we do not know by reason but receive as true by faith. Therefore, we are to fix our external eye on this one specific *forma* of human being, Jesus Christ, as also revealing to us what the form of God is like. To use an English word with a felicitous Latin etymology, we may say that the Incarnation “per-forms” the *forma Dei*: the Incarnate Lord acts out or dramatizes for us what the form of God is like. We easily take in the former, which teaches us about the latter.⁴⁶

All this sounds as if salvation for Augustine is mainly a cognitive or intellectual matter, but this could not be further from the truth, since the whole man—including the appetitive part—is bound to sensible things. The whole man will thus have to be reformed in the process of being led to look at the *forma Dei*; his actions will have to be virtuous and he will have to live rightly, that is, live detached from *temporalia* and attached to God and neighbor in charity. It is perfectly natural, then, that not only Christ’s actions (his humility, submission to the Cross, etc.) but also his words (the Sermon on the Mount) teach such detachment. In both word and deed, the sensible *forma servi* positively leads the mind to contemplation by per-forming what the *forma Dei* is like, and the same *forma servi* likewise negatively conduces to such contemplation by condemning whatever corporeal attachments might hinder it. This overcoming of distractions to contemplation, as we noted above, is exactly why *De doctrina* em-

46. Detailing in greater detail how exactly this works in Augustine would take us too far afield, although significant qualifications will be given below. Part of the question revolves around how it is that temporal things could ever lead the mind to eternal things, since the two seem at first glance definitionally opposed. Yet, as Griffiths notes, the eternal realm also contains all temporal truths atemporally, such as when Augustine was born or that Paul was a just man. These truths, Augustine thinks, are eternal thoughts in God’s mind. In coming to know them we come to know a part of what God knows and are thereby conformed to him. So likewise the Incarnation performs for us the essential or formal truths about God. See Paul Griffiths, *Lying: An Augustinian Theology of Duplicity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2004), 50–51.

phasizes the dual command to love as the goal of scriptural interpretation. The intellect and will are inseparable in this process, because God must be both known as true and loved as good, preferably with the knowledge that these diverse aspects are not really diverse in God, who is the soul's object. Such an integration is precisely the movement of one's dis-integrated intellect and will toward the integral oneness that the Trinity is.

These are the metaphysical nuts and bolts that hold up Augustine's soteriology, centered on the *forma servi*. Yet Augustine has another, entirely cognate set of terms in which he often places this same metaphysics of reference when he is talking about the corporeal forms that are words. This is his famous and influential comparison of what happens when we speak of the eternal and temporal generation of the Word from the Father.⁴⁷ Just as the Father eternally begets and hence "conceives" his Word (as we say, conveniently, also in English), so the Word made flesh was "conceived" in the Virgin's womb, and so our thoughts are "conceived" in our mind and birthed in our corporeal words. Each is an instance of invisible thought giving birth to its expression, without thereby being changed or lost, in its word(s). This Word-conceives-word comparison in general is of course related in the closest possible way to the *forma Dei-forma servi* schema. The two ways of describing the Incarnation are theologically identical and able to be overlaid at every point, and he often explains the two with reference to each other:

In that eternal truth, from which all *temporalia* were made, we observe with the sight of the mind that *forma* according to which we are and according to which we do anything, either in ourselves or in *corporalia*. And from this true knowledge of things is conceived, which we have with us as a sort of word, and we give birth to it by saying it internally, and that does not depart from us when it is born. When we speak to others we give, with our voice or with some other corporeal sign, a servant to the word that remains within, in order that through a sort of sensible memory-aid the same sort of thing might happen in the

47. Thomas in particular adopts this account in *Summa theologiae* I, q. 27 and q. 34 and makes it the basis of his account both of the processions of the Trinity and of human cognition.

soul of the listener as exists in, and does not depart from, the soul of the speaker.⁴⁸

The *verbum Dei* is also the *forma Dei*, not just because they appear to be the same in Scripture, but also, as he explicitly says in various places, because *verbum* and *forma* are conceptually synonymous philosophical terms, even for non-Christian philosophers.⁴⁹

Therefore, salvation is either like the materially embedded form of a thing that draws the mind of its perceiver to understand the intelligible and immaterial essence of what that thing is, or—when he is dealing specifically with the *corporalia* that are words—like a speaker making his thought corporeal through his word in order to draw the mind of his hearer to his own intelligible and immaterial thought. In both schemas, the eternal, invisible, and intelligible *forma/verbum* becomes visible in the Incarnation for the purpose of leading our distracted minds back to the contemplation of eternal things.

Finally, although this is not the place to give a detailed account of Augustine's theory of language, it is worth mentioning that this theological metaphysics of reference (of the Church to the Incarnate Son and of the Son to the Father) is precisely what grounds Augustine's further conviction that human words, including the words of Scripture, refer not just to other words but also to things (metaphysically rather than physically, of course) and ultimately to *the* thing itself.⁵⁰ Because the Word refers (supremely successfully) to the Father, creation has been made such that

48. Augustine, *De Trinitate* 9.7.12. See other examples of the two schemas variously mixed up with each other: *De Trinitate* 15.16.25. "Verbum Dei . . . quod in forma Dei sic est . . . sine cogitatione Dei debet intellegi, ut forma ipsa simplex intellegatur." See also *De Genesi ad litteram* 1.15.29, where Augustine explicitly compares form and matter with their cognate pair of *verbum* and *vox*. On all this, including an extensive treatment of "form" in Augustine, see Étienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine* (New York: Random House, 1960), 198–208. Takeshi Kato, "Sonus et verbum: De Doctrina Christiana 1.13.12," in *De doctrina Christiana: A Classic of Western Culture*, 87–94, fails to convince that there are real differences in Augustine's account of this across his works. John David Dawson's account in "Sign Theory, Allegorical Reading, and the Motions of the Soul in de Doctrina Christiana," in *De doctrina Christiana: A Classic of Western Culture*, 126–31, is to be preferred.

49. See Augustine, *De Genesi ad litteram* 1.4.9–5.10; *De diversis quaestionibus* 46.

50. For a standard descriptive account of Augustine's theory of language, see, with the footnotes, Cary, *Outward Signs*, 66–69, 97–98, 144–45.

human words image this divine reference by their own successful reference to other things.⁵¹ This similarity between the Trinity and human beings—the ability to refer to things by words—is of course part of what makes up the very image of the Trinity in us. On the other hand, human words, as Augustine often insists, do not achieve the transparent and exact imaging of their objects that the Word does vis-à-vis the Father. There is always imperfect reference in our use of them, due to the Fall, and in this sense all our words are used analogously.⁵² But precisely because of the analogy of human language to the Son's exact reference to the Father, our words refer not just to other words but also to things. Hence Augustine's frequent insistence that the reader of Scripture pay attention not to the words but to their *res*.⁵³

In other words, for Augustine, the ability of human words to refer to their objects is a vestige of the Word's ability to refer to the Father, and therefore it is grounded not merely in a Platonic theory but in his confession of the Nicene symbol. This is important because so many, not least those mentioned above, have lately read Augustine as the fount of a sign-based hermeneutics that is the forerunner to modern nonreferentialist epistemologies. Likewise, even those interested in "theological interpretation" often implicitly endorse such a view by stressing the authority of ecclesial communities in the ongoing construction of the meaning of Scripture. For Augustine, however, to deny the referential potential of human words could only be a reflection of some form of Arianism grounded in a prior denial of the Son's ability to refer to the Father.⁵⁴

51. For this linguistic theory, see esp. Augustine, *De Trinitate* 6.10.11–12, 9.10.16, and 12.5.5. See also more generally Augustine, *De diversis quaestionibus octoginta tribus* 46.2: "Ideas igitur latine possumus vel formas vel species dicere, ut verbum e verbo transferre videamur. Si autem rationes eas vocemus, ab interpretandi quidem proprietate discedimus; rationes enim Graece logoi appellantur non ideae: sed tamen quisquis hoc vocabulo uti voluerit, a re ipsa non abhorrebit."

52. See Augustine, *De doctrina* 1.6.6.

53. Augustine, *De Trinitate* 5.7.8: "Quamobrem non est in rebus considerandum quid vel sinat vel non sinat dici usus sermonis nostri, sed quis rerum ipsarum intellectus eluceat."

54. I would submit that this connection is not lost on him in the pages of *De Trinitate*.

III. THE CATHOLIC FORM OF SCRIPTURE

So stands the basic structure of reference for Augustine, both in relation to the Trinity and creatures. Yet there is one more point that more fully explains Augustine's insistence on the Catholic nature of Scripture, namely his assumption, utilized and intimated but never made explicit in *De doctrina*, that the sign-system that the Catholic Church is, refers by means of its participation in, and substantial union with, the intelligible *forma servi*. What he does say in *De doctrina*, however, amounts to the same thing, that is, that not only is the Church the body of Christ, but that when Scripture speaks it does so as both the Lord, who is the head, and his body together.⁵⁵ This is his famous ecclesiological axiom of *totus Christus*: Christ is both the ascended head and the Catholic body below, as he frequently quotes St. Paul saying.⁵⁶ This is the final link in the chain that grounds the "nature" of the Scriptures as inextricably Catholic.

Although Augustine never spells out in great detail the exact nature of the relationship between Christ and the Church, they are so closely related that he describes them as being "one flesh," using the analogy of marriage (since St. Paul makes this connection explicitly).⁵⁷ The sufferings that the Church endures, and that St. Paul says complete, in his own body, the Passion of Christ, do so for Augustine because Christ's Passion includes all the suffering of the Church from Abel to the martyrs.⁵⁸ Perhaps even more strikingly, it is not just that the Church became Christ's members after the Ascension and Pentecost, but, in the

55. Augustine, *De doctrina* 3.31.44. This is the first principle of scriptural interpretation included in the list of Tichonius the Donatist that Augustine adopts and endorses.

56. Augustine, *Enarrationes* 3.9, 30.2.

57. *Ibid.*, 38.5: "Both the Head and the Body of Christ are speaking. Why do they speak as if one person only? Because 'they two,' as He has said, 'shall be one flesh' Genesis 2:24. 'This' (says the Apostle) 'is a great mystery; but I speak concerning Christ and the Church.'"

Both the head and the body are speaking. Why do they speak as one person only? Because 'the twain,' as He hath said, 'shall be one flesh.' This, says the Apostle, is a great mystery, I speak of Christ and the Church."

58. *Ibid.*, 61.4.

very assumption of flesh from the Virgin, the Son also assumed each and every member of the Church: "For the Church too was taken into that man who was made flesh and dwelt among us."⁵⁹ The Father thus loves the Church because he loves his Son, and even before they existed the Church's members were the very members of his Son.⁶⁰ Not only current and past members of the Church but also all those yet to be born are currently part of his body, since all were already assumed in the Incarnation.⁶¹ Thus, the Church and the Incarnate Lord are one from the very beginning. This means, of course, that something very near an identification is able to be made between the referential nature of the *forma servi*, and the sign-system that the Church is.

Thus, in the following passage, Augustine comes within a hair's breadth of a total identification of the Church with the *forma servi*:

No greater gift could God have given to men than in making his *verbum*, by which he created all things, their head, and joining them to him as his members, that the Son of God might become also the Son of man, one God with the Father, one man with men, so that when we speak beseeching God, we are not separate from the Son. . . . When the body of the Son prays, it separates not its head from itself. . . . He is purged, therefore, and he keeps watch over his faith, . . . and the words of the Psalm he wanted to be his own, hanging on the cross and saying, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" He is prayed to in the *forma Dei*, in the *forma servi* he prays. There as Creator, here as created, assuming unchanged the creature that is to be changed, making us one man with himself, head and body.⁶²

In this wonderfully ambiguous passage, the *forma Dei*-*forma servi* schema is mapped onto the head-body schema. The *forma servi*, he says, prays; he means, apparently, it prays both as the Incarnate

59. *Ibid.*, 3.9.

60. Augustine, *In Evangelium Ioannis* 110.5, 111.6.

61. Augustine, *Enarrationes* 62.2: "Non solum autem fideles qui modo sunt sed et qui fuerunt ante nos, et qui post nos futuri, sunt usque in finem saeculi, omnes ad corpus eius pertinent."

62. *Ibid.*, 85.1.

Lord prayed before his Passion and as the Church is praying now. Or, rather, the point of the passage seems to be that the distinction should be made in the first place only to be erased. I hesitate to call this a complete identification of the Church with Christ, both being the *forma servi*, simply because I cannot find any passages where the Church *in se* is called the *forma servi*. In other words, it is possible that Augustine reserves that explicit appellation for the one human body of the Son, so that the sojourning Church would not properly be so called.⁶³ Even were that to be so, it is precisely the point of this passage that one can only draw the finest line between the two—if any. The *forma servi* and the Church, with the exception of this one possible reservation, are to be otherwise entirely identified by a transference of properties: Jesus is purged, keeps vigil, prays the cry of dereliction, and sweats drops of blood because these are all things the Church

63. If this were to turn out to be the case—and I retain the hypothetical—why might he do it? The obvious answer is that Church members are sinful and Christ is not. Christ speaks the pure words of God, but the Church, a *corpus permixtus*, is capable of falsehood and corruption. Augustine finds this mixed body speaking often in the Psalms themselves (so that we often have to sort out what is perfectly uttered by the head and what is imperfectly said by the Church in its sinful state). Even so, it is useful to keep in mind that the fallible words of the Church are still so closely identified with the infallible Christ that they are one body. When the words of the Church, then, are also the words of Scripture—not just those that happen to be spoken by any of its members—then the Church speaks as part of the divinely instituted sign-system of the Church that is, surely, inseparable from Christ's incarnate body. In Scripture, the Church speaks in complete union with her head.

This is not the place to try to extract from Augustine a consistent technical schema for the union of body and head, if that is even possible. Complications arise not least because he sometimes says the head and the body are one *persona* and sometimes two, as in *Enarrationes* 37.5 and 61.4, respectively. There is also the difficult task of determining whether, when he speaks of these *personae*, he is speaking only of literary “characters” (speaking in the Psalms), or of independently existing persons, such as the persons of the Trinity. All this, then, is closely bound up with christological questions. We might speculate that the *forma servi* is identical to the Church in everything but its consubstantial nature (see, e.g., Augustine, *In Evangelium Ioannis* 110.1). While such a position might suggest exactly that the Church does not share the *forma servi*, since it is a thing's *forma* that gives it its *natura*, this is not so. Just as for Augustine the union of God and man in one *persona* fully unites the *forma Dei* to human nature and thus becomes the *forma servi*, so does the same personal union, assuming the Church from the beginning (as in *Enarrationes* 37.5), unite the *forma servi* to the body of the Church in a way that allows for the Church to utter the words of Christ in same way Christ utters the words of God.

does now—and indeed the head does now as part of the Church. The *forma servi* is indistinguishable from the Church: they are, as he says repeatedly, one man. The sign-system that the Church is thus participates in the divine economy of reference precisely by participating so closely with the referential *forma servi*, which grounds the whole economy of salvation.

As part of the Church, then, when Scripture speaks, it does so precisely by articulating divine truth as it receives it from its direct participation in the referential *forma servi*. The whole Church is, of course, Catholic in form, and so any part of it, including Scripture, will be Catholic in form too. Indeed any part of Scripture—Psalms, prophets, Gospel—speak as the voice of the body together with its head. Scripture participates in the form “Catholic” (among others, of course) because the Church participates in the *forma servi*. The Scriptures are always the voice of both Christ and the Church: “the voice is that sweet voice, so well-known to the ears of the Church, the voice of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the voice of his body, the voice of his Church toiling, sojourning upon earth.”⁶⁴ Augustine seamlessly unites the Scriptures with the Church, and the Church with her head:

The Holy City is not the Church of this country only, but of the whole world as well, . . . which City is Christ’s body, of which Christ is the head. . . . Letters have arrived too from that City, apart from which we are wandering: those letters are the Scriptures, which exhort us to live well. Why do I speak of letters only? The King himself descended, and became a path to us in our wanderings. . . . This character, then, we recognize in the whole person of Christ, together with the Church. Thus, sometimes a Psalm, and all prophecy as well, in speaking of Christ, praises the head alone, and sometimes the head leads to the body, which is the Church, and without apparently changing the person spoken of, for the head is not separate from the body, and both are spoken of as one.⁶⁵

Thus, for Augustine the Church is a sign-system because she participates in the supremely referential part of the regime of *similitudes*: Christ’s own body. What the mind apprehends when

64. Augustine, *Enarrationes* 58.2.

65. *Ibid.*, 90.13.

it apprehends the Church's signs is the incarnate form of the form of God. The Church as a sign-system, the referential metaphysics of the *forma servi*, and the doctrine of the *totus Christus* are all mappable onto one another.

The Scriptures, then, form one part of this dense and comprehensive theological nexus, and to divide this nexus into the neat categories of modern theological and philosophical disciplines is almost always to distort it. Indeed, the "broadest" context of this nexus, as we have seen, is literally all-encompassing: the Father's eternal generation of his Word or *forma*. This Nicene dogma grounds the whole temporal regime of *similitudes* by the whole regime's participation in its referential climax, the appearance of the *forma servi*. This supreme sign, which is also its own thing, "collects" and contains within himself all the disparate parts of the regime of *similitudes*, or, rather, the disparate parts were always only pieces of the *forma servi*. These parts include the sign-system the Church is, supremely in her sacraments but also in her Scriptures. All these revelatory signs refer by being taken up into the *forma servi*. Because Scripture is part of the Church's sign-system, it too will refer by virtue of participation in the *forma servi*. The *forma servi* "participates" the Catholic Church into being—gives it a Catholic form—and so Scripture's Catholic form means that it asserts nothing but the Catholic faith. Scripture is Catholic by nature.

CONCLUSION

I have attempted to present here a conceptual archaeology. The thesis for which it argues does not follow from exegesis of any one of Augustine's texts, but, as far as such archaeologies go, it is a fitting one. That is, it allows us to ask—given what Augustine says about signs, salvation, and the Church, and given his Christian-Platonic cosmology (which, in my estimation, is pretty close to Christian cosmology) and its understanding of how things are what they are (which, again, is something like a Christian ontology)—what else could Augustine have thought?

But this interpretation is also attractive because it illuminates several other aspects of his thought. First, it fills out the oft-noted connection between the *Verbum* of God, Christ, and

the *verba* of God, Scripture. Tarmo Toom, for instance, rightly notes that this linguistic connection is theologically grounded in Augustine's comparison between the Word and words that we treated in part two, so that the words of Scripture constitute a privileged, divinely instituted set of words.⁶⁶ The words of Scripture are the material *similitudes* of the Word of God, as Augustine explicitly says: "The Word of God which abides eternal and unchangeable above all that is created, has been disseminated throughout the world by the instrumentality of temporal symbols, and by the tongues of men."⁶⁷ What this way of enunciating his doctrine of Scripture elides, however, is the way that these words are divinely instituted. It is not just that the eternal Word of God has embodied himself in the words of the Scriptures, but that he has done this through the Church. The mind that Scripture expresses is the *forma Dei*, so that the *verba* of Scripture not only puts in corporeal terms the *verbum Dei*, just like the *forma servi* does the *forma Dei*, but they do so precisely as part of the ecclesial body, the one body of the Church, who is one body with the *forma servi* himself. Each word of Scripture is a materially embedded piece of the Incarnation meant to lead the mind to the *forma Dei*. The *verba* of Scripture are not important merely because they are a set of words that happen to be divinely inspired, but they are divinely inspired because they are part of the Church: they are Catholic words that teach nothing but the Catholic faith.

Second, the Catholic form of Scripture actually provides the necessary epistemological ground for Augustine's vast hermeneutical repertoire. His various methods of reading—"literal" and "nonliteral"—are precisely not ways to arbitrarily twist the text until it suits his prior convictions. His engagement with Scripture is not, as those of us living this side of three centuries of historical criticism might be tempted to think, an attempt to bend some order into a hopeless plurality of historically diverse voices. Nor, as hermeneutic readers might suggest, is it mere "play." Nor, finally, is Scripture one of these kinds of "objects" appropriated, claimed,

66. Tarmo Toom, "Augustine on Scripture," in *The T&T Clark Companion to Augustine and Modern Theology*, ed. Tarmo Toom and C.C. Pecknold (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 75–90, at 78.

67. Augustine, *De consens. Evang.* 1.1.

used, or usurped—rightly or wrongly—by the Church. Rather, the fact that Scripture asserts the Catholic faith means that it really does have a meaning stable enough that it is always at least potentially discoverable from the clearer teaching of other parts of the Church, in whose life the Scriptures have their meaning as such. This Catholic meaning is the truth of the Scriptures, actually intelligible to the mind, and by which all interpretive endeavors are to be judged. The Scriptures are received in the Church because they are part of the Church, who in turn defines their nature and meaning. This, therefore, is what makes Augustine's ingenious exegetical methods more than clever intellectual jousting in an ultimately violent assertion of his own power. But, of course, it is also the proper and necessary complement to his insistence on charity in *De doctrina* as the criterion and goal of interpretation. Scripture has an ecclesial nature, and therefore it demands ecclesial reading subjects: not so that it might be given a Catholic shape or form in the first place, but precisely because it already has one.

Importantly, the Catholic nature of Scripture is not only the formal ground of its truth; it is also what allows Augustine to find the Church in Scripture in places where it might otherwise remain hidden, by using the various modes of literal and figurative interpretation he lays out in *De doctrina*. We have already seen this as it functions in his *totus Christus* hermeneutics: there is nothing in the Psalms themselves that say they are the voice of the Church, but, because all Scripture participates in a Catholic form, they can rightly be read as such. For the same reason, he can legitimately find various ecclesial allusions throughout the Scriptures in types and figures—not just Christ but the Eucharist,⁶⁸ the Virgin,⁶⁹ the martyrs,⁷⁰ the veneration of relics,⁷¹ Church hierarchy,⁷² even the specifics of present-day persecutions and the growth of the Church.⁷³ Augustine is well aware

68. Augustine, *Enarrationes* 48.3.

69. *Ibid.*, 18.6.

70. *Ibid.*, 78.5.

71. *Ibid.*, 140.10.

72. *Ibid.*, 64.29.

73. For instance, St. Cyprian's trial and martyrdom is prefigured in Psalm 36. See Augustine, *Enarrationes* 36.12. Scripture also prefigures the growth of

that these features accrued to the Church in his time only gradually. But for him these features can be really found in the text, even if the parts of Scripture take place "before" the Church's birth, because each bit is really (form-ally) a bit of the Church. Yet this also means that the Scriptures contain, as it were, the seeds out of which the Church grows. The Church in Augustine's time is a legitimate development out of, not an exact copy of, what he finds in the book of Acts. The Catholic form of Scripture grounds his own understanding of the providential development of doctrine in the Scriptures themselves.⁷⁴

Finally, while modern interpreters of Scripture are by no means bound to follow Augustine's doctrine, he does provide a substantial conversation partner for many today who wish to engage in those practices that have come to fall under the rubric of "theological interpretation" of Scripture. This is a project that has been widely discussed, and that responds in many ways to an overemphasis on historical criticism (and all its philosophical freight) by turning to focus on what Scripture might have to say about God, his people, and his world today, rather than what it did say when it was originally composed.⁷⁵ Distancing itself from such historicism and its sometimes positivistic emphasis on the biblical text, this movement has tended to emphasize the formation of the reading subject, conversation within the community (ecclesial and sometimes extraecclesial), training in the virtues, sacramental participation, and the ecclesial locale of Scripture as

the Catholic Church throughout the world and the persecution of the Donatists in *Enarrationes* 54.16. Innumerable examples of this sort could be given.

74. I am unable to find an example of Augustine using this Scripture-as-seed trope explicitly, which is surprising, because, after all, "the sower sows the seed" (Mt 13), and the "seed is the word" (Mt 13:37). It is all the more surprising given that Augustine makes such extensive use of the growth of seeds, the *rationes seminales*, elsewhere. St. Bonaventure, however, as Joseph Ratzinger noted long ago in his doctoral dissertation, saw this connection and made it explicit.

75. See the articles in *Nova et Vetera* 9, no. 1 (2011), including: R. R. Reno, "What Makes Exegesis Theological?"; Marcus Bockmuehl, "Bible Versus Theology: Is 'Theological Interpretation' the Answer?"; Francis Martin, "Reflections on Professor Bockmuehl's 'Bible versus Theology.'" More recently, see Brad East, "The Hermeneutics of Theological Interpretation: Holy Scripture, Biblical Scholarship and Historical Criticism," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 19, no. 1 (2017): 30–52.

fundamentally important for its interpretation.⁷⁶ This is sometimes coupled with an account of Scripture as an object of interpretation insofar as it is an ecclesial artifact, historically speaking: it was produced by the Church. As such, the concern for the formation of the reader is at least partially a concern for a subject adequate to its object.

Yet a full-fledged theological account—an account of what Scripture is divinely intended to be—is almost always lacking, and this, it appears, sometimes on principle. Stephen Fowl, for instance, seems to endorse a lack of concern for the nature of Scripture as such, preferring instead an emphasis on the authority of the text comprised by particular communities. “Rather than making an assertion about a property of the text, . . . Christians should best understand claims about scripture’s authority as establishing and governing certain networks of relationships.”⁷⁷ Yet, by sidelining the metaphysical construal of Scripture in favor of a bare consideration of its authority, it is hard to see how the project of theological interpretation does not simply collapse into a basically post-structuralist “play.” However much the Spirit may aid virtuous ecclesial interpreters in such play, all antimetaphysical accounts of Scripture (I withhold judgment as to whether Fowl’s work fits this description) have a hard time explaining why it is the text of Scripture, and not just any text, that holds the particularly authoritative place it does.

By contrast, Augustine’s account provides two things that theological interpretation needs, and should be interested in, though both are wildly unpopular in the current academic climate: 1) an account of Scripture that affirms the referential nature of the text, and 2) an account of the way Scripture really belongs to, and is not just appropriated by, the Catholic Church. The first has been unpopular, obviously, because of the overwhelming influence of postmodern literary criticism in Western academic contexts (where “theological interpretation” is carried

76. These topics are treated in the prominent and seminal work by Stephen Fowl, *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008). See also the essays, almost all of which focus on the nature of the reading community, in Ellen Davis and Richard Hays, eds., *The Art of Reading Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003). Of course, citations of the burgeoning field could be multiplied almost limitlessly in this regard.

77. Fowl, *Engaging Scripture*, 6.

out). The second (related most intimately with the first)⁷⁸ has been unpopular in the current ecumenical atmosphere, which has often sidelined Catholic-Protestant ecclesial differences. Yet the intractable nexus in which Augustine plunges his doctrine of Scripture shows that no engagement with Scripture can ultimately avoid a tacit understanding of what it is. Either one places it within a dense Catholic theology as Augustine does, or—and this is the charge I would lay against most academic attempts at “theological interpretation”—one treats it as a sort of inert object ontologically external to the Church and her doctrine, perhaps to be used by the Church or “put in conversation” with her. But such an approach must underwrite a sort of pan-Protestant denominationalism in which each ecclesial community interprets Scripture truly because each constructs what Scripture is by their reading of it. On this view—which I would suggest is implicitly dominant in such discussions—the Scriptures do not belong to any one ecclesial body, nor do they speak to or about any one such body more than any of the others, including the Catholic body, which suffers reduction to one valid denomination among many. With Augustine, rejecting this error will involve the unpopular claim that the Sacred Scriptures are proper to one visible ecclesial body—the Catholic Church—and that they are supremely connatural to it. The affirmation of such connaturality certainly does not exclude the valid and fruitful interpretation of Scripture by other ecclesial communities; Augustine himself approvingly cites Tyconius the Donatist in *De doctrina*. Rather, it serves to make intelligible the place accorded it alongside sacred tradition as the “one sacred deposit of the word of God, committed to the Church,” and thus begins to provide a metaphysical rationale for the Church’s claim that the living Magisterium alone bears the office of “authentically interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed on” (*Dei Verbum*, 10). □

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78. As Cardinal John Henry Newman saw, the two are mutually implicated, and both are at the heart of the Reformation and the modern world.