

Augustine and Scripture
TEACHING CHRISTIANITY
Prologue

1. There are some rules for dealing with the scriptures, which I consider can be not inappropriately passed on to students, enabling them to make progress not only by reading others who have opened up the hidden secrets of the divine literature, but also by themselves opening them up to yet others again. I have undertaken to pass these rules on to those who are both willing and well qualified to learn, if our Lord and God does not deny me, as I write, the ideas he usually suggests to me in my reflections on the subject.

Before I embark on the task, however, it seems to me that I should first reply to those who are going to find fault with what I say, or who would do so if I did not satisfy them first. But if some people do find fault with me even after this, at least they will not be upsetting others, or luring back from useful study into idle ignorance those whom they might easily upset unless they found them forewarned and forearmed.

2. Some people, you see, are going to find fault with this work, when they fail to understand the rules I will be laying down. Some, on the other hand, when they wish to make use of what they have understood, and attempt to deal with the divine scriptures according to these rules, and find they lack the skill to open up and explain what they would like to, will reckon that I have labored in vain; and because they have not found this work any help, they will conclude that nobody else will either.

The third group of fault-finders consists of those who either do indeed interpret the scriptures very well, or who think that they do. They see, or imagine, that they have acquired the ability to expound the holy books without reading any of the observations I have undertaken to offer to the public; and therefore they will declare that nobody needs these rules, but that it is simply a divine gift which makes possible the praiseworthy opening up of the obscurities of this sacred literature.

3. Let me reply briefly to them all; what I can say to those who do not understand what I write is this: I am not the one to be blamed because they do not understand. It's as though they wished to see the old or the new moon, or some very dim star, which I would be pointing to with my outstretched finger; but if their eyesight was not good enough for them even to see my finger, that would be no reason why they should get indignant with me. As for those who have learned these rules and grasped their import, and even so have been unable to fathom the dark depths of the divine scriptures, they should count themselves as indeed being able to see my finger, but unable to see the heavenly bodies to which it is pointing. So both these and those others should please stop blaming me, and should rather pray that God may grant them light to see with. After all, while I am able, no doubt, to use my finger to point to something, I am not also able to sharpen people's eyes so that they can see either me pointing or the objects I am wishing to point out.

Love of God and neighbor is the sum of what scripture teaches

I. 35, 39. So what all that has been said amounts to, while we have been dealing with things, is that *the fulfillment and the end of the law* and of all the divine scriptures *is love* (Rom 13:8; 1 Tm 1:5); love of the thing which is to be enjoyed, and of the thing which is able to enjoy that thing together with us, because there is no need for a commandment that we should love ourselves. So in order that we might know how to do this and be able to, the whole ordering of time was arranged by divine providence for our salvation. This we should be making use of with a certain love and delight that is not, so to say, permanently settled in, but transitory, rather, and casual, like love and delight in a road, or in vehicles, or any other tools and gadgets you like, or if you can think of any better way of putting it, so that we love the means by which we are being carried along, on account of the goal to which we are being carried.

I. 36, 40. So if it seems to you that you have understood the divine scriptures, or any part of them, in such a way that by this understanding you do not build up this twin love of God and neighbor, then you have not yet understood them. If on the other hand you have made judgments about them that are helpful for building up this love, but for all that have not said what the author you have been reading actually meant in that place, then your mistake is not pernicious, and you certainly cannot be accused of lying. Being a liar, of course, means having the intention of saying what is false; and that is why we find many people intending to lie, but intending to be mistaken, none. So since a person does the one thing knowingly, experiences the other thing unwittingly, it is abundantly obvious that over one and the same thing the person who is mistaken or deceived is better than the person who tells a lie. Everyone who tells a lie, after all, is committing iniquity; and if it seems to anyone that a lie may sometimes be useful, then it can also seem to him that iniquity is sometimes useful. No liar, after all, in the very act of telling a lie is keeping faith; but what he wants, of course, is that the person he tells it to should have faith in him, faith which by lying he is for all that failing to keep. But every violation of faith, or trust, is iniquitous. Either, therefore, iniquity is sometimes useful, which cannot be, or lying is never useful.

Canon

II. 8, 12. ... They will hold, therefore, to this standard with the canonical scriptures, that they will put those accepted by all the Catholic Churches before those which some do not accept; among these which are not accepted by all they will prefer those accepted by most of them, and by the greater ones among them, to those which fewer Churches and ones of lesser authority regard as canonical. Should they, however, discover that different ones are held to be canonical by the majority of Churches from those so regarded by the greater Churches—though this would be very unlikely—I consider that both should be regarded as having equal authority.

The special virtue of the old Itala Latin, and of the Greek Septuagint versions

II. 15, 22. ... For this reason, even if things are found in Hebrew codices that differ from what the Seventy have put, in my judgment they should give way to what divine providence has achieved through these men; and that is that the books which the Jewish people was unwilling to share with others, whether out of a religious sense or out of envy, were made available by the Lord, using the royal authority of Ptolemy, to the nations that were going to believe. And so it can well be the case that these translated the Hebrew in such a way as the Holy Spirit, who was guiding them and gave them all one mouth, judged would be most suitable for the Gentiles (...) But as for the books of the New Testament, if there are any hesitations about the text due to the variety of Latin translations, nobody doubts that one should bow to the authority of the Greek texts, and of those especially which are to be found in the more learned and careful Churches.

Ambiguities over phrasing

III. 2, 2. But when ambiguities arise in scripture about the meaning of words used in their proper sense, the first thing we must do is see whether we have phrased or pronounced them wrongly. So when, on paying closer attention, you still see that it is uncertain how something is to be phrased, or how to be pronounced, you should refer it to the rule of faith, which you have received from the plainer passages of scripture and from the authority of the Church, about which we dealt sufficiently when we were talking in the first book about *things*. But if both possibilities, or all of them, if it is a multiple ambiguity, are consonant with the faith, it remains to refer to the whole context, to the sections that precede and that follow the ambiguous passage, holding it in the middle between them, so that we may see which of the several meanings that present themselves the context will vote for and allow to fit in with itself.

III. 2. 5. Where, however, an ambiguity can be resolved neither by the standard of faith nor by the actual context of the passage, there is no objection to your phrasing it in any of the ways that are open to you...

III. 9. 13. Those, you see, who practice or venerate some kind of thing which is a significant sign, unaware of what it signifies, are enslaved under signs, while those who either carry out or venerate useful signs established by God, fully understanding their force and significance, are not in fact venerating what can be seen and passes away, but rather that reality to which all such things are to be referred. Such people are spiritual and free even during the time of slavery, in which it is not yet opportune for carnal spirits to have those signs openly explained to them, because they still need to be broken in under their yoke. Such spiritual people, however, were the patriarchs and prophets...

III. 10. 15. ... Scripture, though, commands nothing but charity, or love, and censures nothing but cupidity, or greed, and that is the way it gives shape and form to human morals. Again, if people's minds are already in thrall to some erroneous opinion, whatever scripture may assert that differs from it will be reckoned by them to be said in a figurative way. The only thing, though, it ever asserts is Catholic faith, with reference to things in the past and in the future and in the present. It tells the story of things past, foretells things future, points out things present; but all these things are of value for nourishing and fortifying charity or love, and overcoming and extinguishing cupidity or greed.

III. 22. 32. So then, all the doings, or practically all of them, which are contained in the books of the Old Testament, are to be taken not only in their literal sense, but also as having a figurative sense. All the same, when the people in the narratives, which the reader takes in the proper literal sense,^{†50} were praised for doing things that are abhorrent to the manners of good men and women who keep God's commandments after the Lord's coming, the reader should not take the actual deeds as models for moral behavior, but should try to understand their figurative meaning. There are many things, after all, which at that time were done out of duty that now can only be done out of lust.

III. 27. 38. But when from the same words of scripture not just one, but two or more meanings may be extracted, even if you cannot tell which of them the writer intended, there is no risk if they can all be shown from other places of the holy scriptures to correspond with the truth. However, those who are engaged in searching the divine utterances must make every effort to arrive at the intention of the author through whom the Holy Spirit produced that portion of scripture. But as I say, there is nothing risky about it, whether they do get at this, or whether they carve out another meaning from those words which does not clash with right faith, and is supported by any other passage of the divine utterances. That author, in fact, possibly even saw this very meaning in the same words which we wish to understand; and certainly the Spirit of God who produced these texts through him foresaw without a shadow of doubt that it would occur to some reader or listener; or rather he actually provided that it should occur to them, because it is upheld by the truth. How, after all, could the divine scriptures make more abundant and generous provision, than by ensuring that the same words could be understood in several ways, which are underwritten by other no less divine testimonies?

III. 28, 39. But where a possible meaning emerges which cannot be made entirely clear by other certain testimonies of the holy scriptures, it remains to elucidate it with arguments from reason, even if the writer whose words we are trying to understand did not perhaps intend that meaning. But this habit is risky; it is really much safer to walk along with the divine scriptures; when we wish to examine passages rendered obscure with words used metaphorically, either let something emerge from our scrutiny that is not controversial, or else if it is so, let the matter be settled from the same scripture by finding and applying testimonies from anywhere else in the sacred books.