

AUGUSTINE: LESSONS IN CONTEXTUALISATION FROM HIS LIFE AND MINISTRY

By Carlyle Danford¹

Of all visible things, the world is the greatest; of all invisible, the greatest is God. But, that the world is, we see; that God is, we believe.² (Augustine of Hippo)

We rarely read old books. We tend to limit ourselves by era, tribe, and category. We read books written in our day, by people just like us, and that can be placed in one or two limited genres. But this sort of epistolary reductionism is to our detriment - the older books are precisely the ones that will help us to escape the limitations of our current era, learn from those who are not a part of our local tribe, and transcend the categories to which we have become accustomed.³

Ashford's comments are very true of modern society and particularly of Christianity. Christian books have become big business and there are millions of titles of varying degrees of quality and usefulness. The work of the early church fathers is increasingly seldom read by those outside of seminary courses.

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² Augustine of Hippo, *City of God*, Edited by Philip Schaff, Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, n.d., p 480.

³ Bruce Ashford. "Augustine for the 21st Century: why we should read old books", April 14, 2012. betweenthehours.com/2009/08/19/augustine-for-the-21st-century-1-why-should-we-read-old-books/.

As the Arab spring has erupted across the Middle East and northern Africa, it is time to pause and perhaps look back to a time when Christianity dominated this area. We remind ourselves of a time when the fathers Clement, Origen, Athanasius and Cyril wrote from Alexandria in Egypt, Tertullian and Cyprian worked in Carthage, now a suburb of modern Tunis (in Tunisia) and Augustine was bishop of Hippo (now modern day Algeria). These men ministered in countries which are now in the revolutionary process. These regions produced foundational theological concepts that continue to form the base of church belief many centuries later.

These men concerned themselves with ensuring the gospel was taught correctly and was integrated into the lives of the followers of Jesus. We know from several sources, not the least of which are Paul's letters to the various churches, that the Christian message was lived out slightly differently across the Mediterranean. Paul himself presented the gospel differently to different communities depending on their cultural backgrounds and needs.

This process of making a message understood in a new context is called the process of contextualisation. Contextualisation in the church is 'the various processes by which a local church integrates the Gospel message (the text) with its local culture (the context)'.⁴ The text and context must be blended into that one, God-intended reality called the Christian life.⁵

What did contextualisation look like in the early church? How was it practiced by the early believers? In this paper we focus on the life of Augustine of Hippo, a father of the early church born to a Christian mother and a Pagan father, who adopted Manichaeism before a profound conversion to Christianity took place. His life and ministry provide a rich treasure of insight that remains relevant for contextualising the message today. By looking back and outside of our own culture and time we can equip ourselves better for under-

⁴ Louis J. Luzbetak. *The church and cultures: new Perspectives in missiological anthropology*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988, p 69.

⁵ Harrower, John. "What is contextualisation?" Address given to Mission Australia, 2001.

standing our own culture and equipping ourselves for cross-cultural work.

1 The life of Augustine

My discovery of Augustine, I will admit, was by my training as a theologian and teacher in the Lutheran tradition. The reformation caused many of the reformers, not just Luther but others such as Calvin, to recall the work of Augustine in reforming church practice and teaching. Luther calls Augustine the ‘most trustworthy’ interpreter of Paul’s writings.⁶ And the similarities between Paul and Augustine are many as we will discover.

Both Paul and Augustine were concerned with the transmission of thoughts across cultural and societal boundaries. Paul preached to the Greeks and Jews as a Roman while Augustine, a Christian with a Pagan and Manichaeist past, ministered to a disintegrating Roman Empire enchained by Platonism and Paganism.

Born in Thagaste (in modern day Algeria) to middle class parents in 354 AD, Augustine was schooled in Christianity as a young boy by his devout mother Monica. Augustine’s father was a low ranking Roman official who carried on the pagan religion of the empire.

His homeland was on the outskirts of the Roman Empire and the region was of little importance Rome itself. It was a backwater. This seemed to have played on Augustine’s mind. As academically gifted young Augustine was supported to pursue further study in Carthage, ‘[he] set out to make himself more Roman than the Romans and to penetrate to the centre of the culture from which he found himself alienated by his provincial birth.’⁷

There he took up house with a young woman who would bear him a son and he seemingly enjoyed the hedonistic lifestyle. There he encountered and began following Manichaeism, a quasi Christian

⁶ Martin Luther. *Luther’s works vol.31: career of the reformer 1*. Edited by Harold J. Grimm, General Editor Helmut T. Lehmann. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957, p 39.

⁷ James O’Donnell. “Augustine the African”, April 15, 2012. web.archive.org/web/20030402073020/ccat.sas.upenn.edu/jod/twayne/aug1.html.

sect which preached the duality of light and darkness. The light was knowledge, soul and spirit, while darkness was ignorance, matter and the body. This system of thought taught salvation through the attainment of special knowledge and abstinence from some earthly pleasures.

After returning home briefly to teach, he moved back to take students in Carthage and then finally onto Rome. Showing obvious potential he was appointed professor of rhetoric for the imperial court in Milan – the most prestigious academic position in the Latin world at that time.

Despite his success, Augustine remained troubled. He had to dismiss the mother of his child to take a society marriage in Milan arranged by his mother. While waiting for his fiancée to come of age he took up with yet another concubine. He also began to question Manichaeism through acquaintances encouraging him to see it as illogical and discovering that even the greatest teachers of the sect were unable to answer his deepest questions.⁸

Augustine had dismissed the Christian faith of his mother for two main reasons. Firstly, 'If God was supreme and pure goodness, evil could not be a divine creation. And if, on the other hand, all things were created by the divine, God could not be as good and wise as Monica and the church claimed.' Secondly, from the point of view of rhetoric, the Bible was a series of inelegant writings which contained inconstant style. How can a book, so full of violence and humanity, be the word of God?⁹

One of the turning points of Augustine's journey to truth was hearing the renowned Bishop Ambrose of Milan speak. Augustine first came to simply hear Ambrose as a great orator. As Gonzalez writes, 'his initial purpose was not to hear what Ambrose had to say, but to see how he said it.'¹⁰ Ambrose taught many passages that concerned Augustine as allegory, thus eliminating Augustine's con-

⁸ John Bowen. "Evangelism in Augustine's confessions: ancient light on a contemporary subject" 14/04/2012. institute.wycliffecollege.ca/2007/03/evangelism-in-the-augustine%E2%80%99s-confessions-ancient-light-on-a-contemporary-subject/

⁹ Justo L. González. *The story of Christianity: the early church to the reformation*. New York: Harper One, 2010, pp 244-45.

¹⁰ González p 245.

cerns about the legitimacy of the Word of God due to its brutal, ill-written and earthy elements. Ambrose spoke of Christianity in such an academically rigorous manner that Augustine's objections on academic grounds fell away also. Augustine also saw that man's free will and original sin were the cause of evil, and not God himself. He began to see his mistaken ideas of Christianity and grasp the mystery of God.

But still, Augustine was a 'spiritual mongrel' whose conversion was not yet complete.

Raised a Catholic by his mother, he became a catechumen in Ambrose's church—but initially at least, this was probably no more than a move of expediency made by many up-and-comers. At the same time, he was well-acquainted with the Punic paganism of his late father, and technically was still a Manichean, though he seems to have pressed the borders of that faith and moved beyond it. Also...Roman paganism [was] paying his bills.¹¹

The oft heard story, of Augustine's epiphany in his garden, hearing the words "take up and read" float over his garden wall, highlights the key moment in his journey. He had put down a manuscript of the apostle Paul's writings and when he returned to it after hearing these ethereal words on the wind he read Romans 11, 'let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.'¹²

It was medicine to Augustine's ears and assurance that he should indeed turn from his previous life of seeking earthly pleasure and assurance through attaining salvation through one's own power. Augustine writes of his journey extensively in his *Confessions*, 'And thus by degrees I was led upward from bodies to the soul [which]

¹¹ Randy Peterson. "Augustine's life and times." *Christian History*, 2010. www.chinstitute.org/index.php/chm/fifth-century/augustines-life/.

¹² *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989.

cried out that the unchangeable was better than the changeable.¹³ Augustine's attraction to the pure ethics of Christianity was one he shared with many converts to early Christianity.¹⁴

He realised that his objections to Christianity were misunderstandings of the message.

For, as to those passages in the Scripture which had heretofore appeared incongruous and offensive to me, now that I had heard several of them expounded reasonably, I could see that they were to be resolved by the mysteries of spiritual interpretation. The authority of Scripture seemed to me all the more revered and worthy of devout belief because, although it was visible for all to read, it reserved the full majesty of its secret wisdom within its spiritual profundity.¹⁵

Augustine's turning point was through being immersed in solid scriptural study based on the preaching of Ambrose and his own reflection. Of this he writes:

I was also glad that the old Scriptures of the Law and the Prophets were laid before me to be read, not now with an eye to what had seemed absurd in them when formerly I censured thy holy ones for thinking thus, when they actually did not think in that way. And I listened with delight...¹⁶

While many took baptism during this time for career or societal advancement, this was not case for Augustine. At this realisation of the truth of Christianity, Augustine abandoned his life and high position in society. He was baptised, sold much of his possessions and returned to Thagaste to set up what one could consider the forerunner of a modern monastic community.

The story of Augustine becoming a minister is famous. Augustine was visiting the church in Hippo when the Bishop Valerius, after spotting the now notable Augustine in the congregation, preached that God would send shepherds for the flock and

¹³ Augustine of Hippo. *Confessions*. Translated by Albert C. Outler. Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, n. d., p 111.

¹⁴ William C. Weinrich. "Evangelism in the early church." *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 45, January-April, 1981, p 70.

¹⁵ *Confessions* p 85.

¹⁶ *Confessions* p 83.

asked the gathered assembly to pray if there was one present in the congregation at that very moment to pastor them. Augustine was identified, promptly ordained and as custom went, was 'chained' to the same church until his death in 430.

Augustine spent the remainder of his life focussing on the needs of the believers in front of him. For him worship was the heart of the Christian's life and his ministry. He was particularly aware of the society Christians who would pack his church each week to hear his sermon to ensure their social status and he saw his chief duty to awaken them to the truth and mystery of the gospel.

Augustine stressed the utter fallenness of humanity and the inability of humans to do any good without God's help. Augustine read Romans 9-11 and applied Paul's words about the calling of Israel to the salvation of individual men and women. Our salvation, he reasoned on this basis, is entirely God's work...'¹⁷

While he was seemingly tucked away in the fringe of the empire and of Christianity, his influence would live on for centuries to come through his extensive writing. While parts of Hippo were destroyed following his death in 430, some 100 books, 240 letters and in excess of 500 sermons survived and continue to provide worthy study for Christians today.

2 Augustine's response to popular religious thought of his day

One who reads Augustine's sermons notes easily that he was a man dearly concerned with the lives of his congregants. He was not a man simply interested in academic Christianity. Augustine was primarily a pastoral theologian and was concerned first with the public preaching of the word. He only concerned himself in wider debate when outside influences interfered with this congregation. As a shepherd, there were many movements that threatened his flock.

The first of the ideas that threatened his congregation was the Manichaeism with which he himself aligned years earlier. It held

¹⁷ Campbell, Ted. *Christian confessions: a historical introduction*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996, p 68.

that eternal salvation was found by separating the light and dark from the human life in order to prepare the soul for salvation through one's own power. As Augustine had led many to Manichaeism, he felt a particular call to minister to these people. His prime response was to argue that the will that was created by God is inherently good in itself but humanity chooses evil. One's nature is a continual battle that is only resolved by Christ. While Augustine did not give a great deal of attention to Christology, his thoughts on salvation through grace alone are clearly seen echoed in the work of the protestant reformers. The release of people from the bondage of paying dues to pagan gods and the fear of trying to save oneself was a prime driver in his work.

Augustine later encountered the Donatists who questioned the validity of sacraments (baptism and communion) administered by bishops of poor character. Augustine argued that the validity of the rights performed by these bishops did not depend on their personal power but on the Church universal. The impact on the congregation here is obvious and could lead to crises of faith. Is the communion valid? The baptism? The forgiveness of sins?¹⁸ Augustine extends his previous teaching against Manichaeism and argues strongly that if the work of God is dependent on our work then we are doomed for failure. It again reaffirms the teaching of grace. Augustine clearly argued that the church was a place for sinners and saints. 'The validity of the church's ministry and preaching did not depend upon the holiness of its ministers, but upon the person of Jesus Christ'¹⁹

Pelagianism taught that as the will is free, humanity can choose to overcome sin and therefore achieve salvation without the work of Christ. It was a movement that drew on the teaching of a British ascetic monk named Pelagius who held that human beings were able to take the lead in their own salvation. Augustine argued that the human will is not that simplistic and sin can take hold of it. Also, by

¹⁸ Gunton, Colin E. *The Christian faith: an introduction to Christian doctrine*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 2004, p 130.

¹⁹ Alister E. McGrath. "The Patristic period", In *Christian theology: an introduction*. Chichester, West Sussex, U.K: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011, p 30.

affirming the doctrine of original sin, he maintained that humanity cannot take the initiative in salvation. As McGrath summarises the thoughts of Augustine, ‘Nothing that a man or woman could do was sufficient to break the stranglehold of sin.’²⁰ Again, Augustine comforts the hearers by affirming the work of Christ as key to salvation. Much of Augustine’s later years were spent on writing the *City of God* which was written against the backdrop of the sacking of Rome in 410 AD by the Visigoths. This event led to a resurgence of Pagan beliefs and some saw it as punishment for the empire turning to worship this new Jesus instead of the gods of Rome. Many Roman refugees moved into North Africa and into Augustine’s congregation. He took this opportunity to show his flock, as God had showed him through Ambrose, that earthly history and work are simply a poor reflection of God’s ultimate history and work.

His core argument was that society can be divided into two cities - the City of Man (based on the love of idols) and the City of God (based on the love of God). We are faced with a choice between the cities but we are drawn to what we truly love. Ultimately we love God or ourselves. Salvation is found through a God who seeks us out in both cities. There are eternal consequences for taking up residence in either city – life for those in the City of God and death for those in the City of Man.²¹ Augustine clearly presents God’s grace in seeking out humankind where we reside and offering salvation through the person and work of Christ only.

The Heavenly City [(of God)] outshines Rome [(The City of Man)] beyond comparison. There, instead of victory, is truth; instead of high rank, holiness; instead of peace, felicity; instead of life, eternity.²²

We can see from facing challenges that Augustine’s prime argument was always for the prime importance of God’s plan for salvation through Christ. His Christianity is argued strongly and has a firm focus on grace. The concept of grace was a counter cultural

²⁰ McGrath p 33.

²¹ Bruce Ashford “Augustine’s argument in the City of God.” 14/04/2012. betweenthetimes.com/2009/08/21/augustine-for-the-21st-century-2-what-is-augustines-argument-in-the-city-of-god/

²² Bowen np.

concept for a Roman society in a myriad of works' theology systems of thought.

3 The implications of Augustine's ministry and theology for today

3.1 The best bearers of the message are those of the culture itself

Augustine's ministry is so very similar to Paul's words in 1st Corinthians 9:20-23

To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.

In *The City of God*, Augustine is a teacher of Truth who is a Roman and was schooled from a young age in the dominant religious philosophies of the region. He was both Christian and Pagan and this meant he could speak the discourse of both. He had keenly felt the strain of the pressure of being part of religious systems which relied on personal achievement for grace to be attained. Like Luther would rediscover many centuries later, Augustine understood fully the welcoming comfort of Ephesians 2:8-9, 'For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God - not the result of works, so that no one may boast.' He had suffered what Christians, Romans and outcasts had suffered. This is why themes of grace are so prominent in his works and why his ministry had such an impact. He was of the cultures he served. Augustine writes:

For if two men, each ignorant of the other's language meet, and are not compelled to pass, but, on the contrary, to remain in company, dumb animals, though of different species, would more easily hold intercourse than they, human beings though they be. For their common nature is no help to friendliness when they are prevented by diversity of language from conveying their sentiments to one another; so that a

man would more readily hold intercourse with his dog than with a foreigner.²³

Those that are not already embedded in the culture must work, as Paul did, to become part of the culture at the deepest of levels and be able to speak the entirety of the cultural discourses of language, custom and so forth.

3.2 The message needs to be sent in a manner consistent with ways of the culture

Augustine suffered for a time from a misconception of Christianity that did not make cultural sense. Brown writes:

The great Platonists of this age...could provide them with a profoundly religious view of the world, that grew naturally out of an immemorial tradition. The claim of the Christian, by contrast, lacked intellectual foundation. For [Romans] to accept the Incarnation would have been like a modern European denying the evolution of the species; he would have had to abandon not only the most advanced, rationally based knowledge available to him, but, by implication, the whole culture permeated by such achievements. Quite bluntly, the pagans were the 'wise' men...and the Christians were 'stupid'.²⁴

Augustine encountered a set of religious teachings in Christianity which were not academic in nature nor observed the rules of classicism. It was against his nature to put his faith in something so seemingly vulgar and his process of coming to faith was unfortunately a process of unlearning the Christianity that had been given to him. This is not an experience foreign to us in the church and Bowen likens Augustine's experience to people who attend the famous 'Alpha type'²⁵ courses.²⁶

²³ *City of God* p 924.

²⁴ Peter Brown. *Augustine of Hippo: a biography*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969, p 302.

²⁵ Alpha courses have been run across the world in various guises in the last 30 years. Originally from England, the course focuses on exploring the claims of Christianity in a relaxed atmosphere which encourages attendees to ask questions and explore misconceptions about Christianity.

²⁶ Bowen np.

Augustine's rejection of Christ was due to a misunderstanding of the gospel gained through his interaction with Christians of his day. His conclusions were reached by acting against what they taught about God, not what God Himself taught.

I blushed that for so many years I had bayed, not against the Catholic faith, but against the fables of fleshly imagination. For I had been both impious and rash in this, that I had condemned by pronouncement what I ought to have learned by inquiry.²⁷

When Ambrose taught the message in a manner in which Augustine could understand it in the context of his culture, he was changed and he used this technique to reach others.

In *City of God*, Augustine attempts to reach the last followers of paganism through using Roman methods of argumentation, utilising Roman literature and history.²⁸ He challenges the perfection of the pagan gods and of Rome itself, and in doing so transforms the Roman view of their own history.²⁹ Augustine invites them into the mystery of God's city – he doesn't tell them they are wrong. He puts forward a solidly constructed thesis for a society that valued sound logic and argumentation. In preparation for this work he reread the great works of the classical tradition and returned to his roots as a classical orator of the highest level.

'And thou saidst unto the Athenians by the mouth of thy apostle that in thee "we live and move and have our being," as one of their own poets had said.'³⁰ Augustine noted that Paul used the local culture's specific search for truth as recorded in Acts 17:16-34 as an avenue to contextualize the message of the risen Christ. Just as Augustine reinterprets the history of Rome, Paul reinterprets the religiosity of the Athenians.

Augustine understood all philosophy to be a search for the ultimate reality.³¹ In *City of God* he begins with the narrative of the

²⁷ *Confessions* p 83.

²⁸ Brown p 305.

²⁹ Brown p 310.

³⁰ *Confessions* p 107.

³¹ Augustine of Hippo. *On Christian doctrine*. Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, n.d., p 65.

host culture, in this case, Roman culture and Paganism. Using the knowledge gained through his education, he carefully and rigorously points out how the seeming argument between Paganism and Christianity isn't actually about religion; it is about power. Augustine does not attack the opposing religion itself; he exposes how that religion was being used to distort the narrative, distort the truth. He encourages the Romans to question their own beliefs themselves – rather than condemn their belief. This approach has much to commend it to us in our work today.

3.3 Preach a message containing the mystery of Christ and not the cultural Christ

Augustine's prime goal was to draw people further into the mystery of Christ and what the Father was doing through the Holy Spirit in this life. This idea culminated in his concept in *The City of God* when he speaks at length of a city that we cannot see but is so very real and important. His Christianity is an invitation into wisdom and mystery, of certainty in uncertainty, and into seeing the reality of God's story. It isn't a message that demands people follow certain cultural practices surrounding Christianity.

A wonderful teacher of contemplative Spirituality and social action, Richard Rohr writes

In [the Gospels] Jesus is constantly presented as inclusive. Here he is a Jew, but he's always including the Gentiles, the outsiders, foreigners, prostitutes, drunkards, the tax collectors, the Roman centurion, the Syrophenician woman. So it's very hard to think that this Jesus, who in his human life, is so consistently inclusive, would then create a religion in his name that was exclusive, or exclusionary. That was never his pattern. And so it forces us to interpret that line, "I am the way, the truth, and the life," in a different way than "My religion is better than your religion," or "I have the only true religion." Now, one way I think it could well mean that is, again, if we understand the Christ as this eternal mystery of the co-existence of matter and spirit – which we call the mystery of the incarnation – that's Christianity's trump card.³²

³² Rohr, Richard. "The heavens and the earth declare God's glory", 14/04/2012. maes-seekegodfirst.blogspot.com/2011/02/richard-rohr-on-mystery-of-christ.html.

It is not that we begin to preach universalism. 'To affirm the unique decisiveness of God's action in Jesus Christ is not arrogance; it is the enduring bulwark against arrogance of every culture to be itself the criterion by which others are judged.'³³ This is the mystery that Augustine speaks of with great reverence. Augustine was very clear that Christ ruled the city of God but he made it clear humbly and through inviting others to question about their own world view.

To preach the cultural Christ is to preach the Christ we think we know, the one that makes people go to church every Sunday morning and participate in strange rituals like the passing of the peace and fellowship after service. Let us not bind Christ up to be only what our own culture believes him to be. Preach the mystery across cultures. Non-western cultures often deal better with the concept of mystery than the so called 'developed' church of the West does.

3.4 Understand that we are workers in God's fields and bear a message belonging to Him

In a personal conversation with Richard Rohr, Rohr remarked that his greatest prayer is for God to help him stay out of the way of what God was doing in this world; to keep the 'me', the 'self', the 'ego' and my 'culture' from stopping the magnificent glory of God's love being proclaimed to the nations.³⁴ How often our own attempts to share this glory have not been a process of allowing but one of forcing, making, improving, quantifying and pushing.

The evangelization of Augustine is certainly not a single activity: it is spread over many years, and involves a wide variety of friendships, difficulties, conversations, prayers, encounters, readings, disagreements, self-examinations, mentors, false starts, scripture, and (in the end) a dramatic conversion. 'Farming' and 'education' might indeed be suitable metaphors for this process.³⁵

Augustine was very aware of how God works through various people and events to bring about faith. He talks at length about the

³³ Lesslie Newbigin. *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*. Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1989, p 166.

³⁴ Personal conversation with Richard Rohr, New Mexico, USA, April 2011.

³⁵ Bowen np.

influence of Ambrose of Milan's preaching, the faith of his mother and those that questioned his commitment to Manichaeism.

Augustine writes of Ambrose '...to Milan I came, to Ambrose the bishop, famed through the whole world as one of the best of men, thy devoted servant...That man of God received me as a father would, and welcomed my coming as a good bishop should. And I began to love him, of course, not at the first as a teacher of the truth, for I had entirely despaired of finding that in thy Church—but as a friendly man.³⁶ Ambrose was a man who was prepared to disciple this young man and help him answer the questions he held deep inside.

Augustine's *Confessions* [and his story of coming to faith] provides a salutary corrective for a contemporary theology and praxis of evangelism. In particular, the *Confessions* point us away from any sense that evangelism is a matter between the individual and God alone, that the key is in an existential and instantaneous "decision", or that the church's activism will bring it about. In fact, what the *Confessions* offers is a pre-modern corrective to a modernist distortion of evangelism - an understanding that will, ironically enough, equip the church for evangelism in a postmodern world.³⁷

Augustine's understanding of humanity participating in God's work built on an early understanding of church missiology. Weinrich points out: 'The early Church did not understand mission as a merely human action done in response to the good things God had done. Mission was perceived christologically — as God acting for the salvation of fallen mankind, but God acting only in union with mankind. The early Church understood mission to be the very expression of the Lordship of Christ in the Holy Spirit.'³⁸ There is a strong sense of the sharing of God's love being a community endeavor. We are only workers in God's fields and God does the work. Augustine records:

³⁶ *Confessions* p 77.

³⁷ Bowen np.

³⁸ Weinrich p 62.

O Lord, little by little, with a gentle and most merciful hand, drawing and calming my heart, thou didst persuade me that, if I took into account the multitude of things I had never seen, nor been present when they were enacted—such as many of the events of secular history; and the numerous reports of places and cities which I had not seen; or such as my relations with many friends, or physicians, or with these men and those—that unless we should believe, we should do nothing at all in this life.³⁹

3.5 Understand that there are very real implications of the uptake of the Christian message

Upon his conversion, Augustine quit his position as a teacher of high standing in Milan and returned home intending to live a communal quiet life of contemplation. He completely changed his way of life and desires to follow the mystery of the risen Christ. He gave up a position of prestige and power to serve God.

As the Vandals invaded North Africa towards the end of his life, Augustine would have heard of the persecutions and torture of Christians in their wake. Brown makes a point of Augustine's prayers and preparation of his congregation to deal with an attacking force that would quite likely oppose the church violently.⁴⁰

The history of the Christian peoples of the Middle East is well documented and need not be explored here in detail but we must always remember that there is often a cost for following the mystery. All those engaged in this work must be prepared to support those who upon hearing the message, like Augustine, feel called to completely change their life and begin to counter the dominant culture.

3.6 Do not be afraid to teach a rigorous Christianity based on scripture

'God intends to convert the mind as well as the heart and body, and therefore apologetic, argumentation, and dialogue were important instruments in the early Church's missionary endeavours.'⁴¹ It was

³⁹ *Confessions* p 84.

⁴⁰ Brown p 425.

⁴¹ Weinrich p 73.

very central to Augustine's thinking that Christianity be considered a logically and academically defensible faith. McGrath claims that the greatest of the contributions of Augustine to the church, is his development of theology as an academic discipline which allowed him to defend Christianity from its critics and clarify central aspects of its thinking as defence against heresy.⁴²

The epistemology of truth was not something a young Augustine was concerned about but it was through the works of the great orator Cicero that he became convinced that one must also seek truth.⁴³ This search brought about his rigorous theological engagement. This academic engagement was the first time that Christianity would be regarded as academic by the wider empire. 'Augustine had reached out from his provincial city of Hippo Regius to present a plausible sounding challenge to the stiff-necked empire of Pagan Rome.'⁴⁴

Augustine used the entire gambit of basic Christian teachings to critique the opposing narrative. Not just using one doctrine, he spoke of creation, redemption, sin and most importantly, grace. He did this so that the Romans could see clearly the depth of the difference between the two world narratives – one of God as ruler and the other as human ruled.

Augustine's exegesis, seen now in the completeness of his theory, is wholly self-effacing. Exegesis has no ultimate worth, nor is a career as exegete something to be aspired to in itself. Only if interpretation ends by removing itself from between the reader of the sacred text and his God is it successful. If it remains, it is as a barrier rather than an instrument and contributes nothing to the happiness of either interpreter or audience.⁴⁵

A right understanding of scripture was the lynch pin for Augustine's journey and we must always remember the power of the

⁴² McGrath p 18.

⁴³ González p 242.

⁴⁴ Neil B. McLynn, "Augustine's Roman Empire", *Augustinian Studies*, 30:2, 1999, p 44.

⁴⁵ O'Donnell, James. "Augustine: elements of Christianity", April 15, 2012. www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/jod/twayne/aug2.htm.

the Word of God taught responsibly. One of the key strategies for sharing the mystery is to ensure the Word is preached culturally appropriately by suitable people, while also ensuring scripture is available for all to “take up and read,” in order for all to see the truth of the message we send.

4 Closing remarks

Augustine and the early church fathers did not talk at length of misology or contextualisation. They simply lived in their context, worshipped God and loved God’s people inside and outside of the church community.

In recounting the final days of his mother’s life, Augustine writes so beautifully: ‘We opened wide the mouth of our heart, thirsting for those supernal streams of thy fountain, “the fountain of life” which is with thee, that we might be sprinkled with its waters according to our capacity and might in some measure weigh the truth of so profound a mystery.’⁴⁶

Many, such as Augustine, were drawn to the moral code of Christianity and its focus on the other. This was seen through almsgiving, support of widows and orphans, and care for the sick and infirm, to helping the unemployed, caring for slaves, and providing burial services to the poor. Weinrich comments that ‘active charity is the very stuff of the Christian life, and with great probability works of charity provided the early Church its best opportunities for mission.’⁴⁷ This is still true for us today as our best contextualisation of the gospel is to live it.

Augustine constructs his own journey to faith as a play that has many acts and players. It was not without pain and desperation, but through it all God was working and calling him home. In the opening book of his *Confessions*, Augustine writes ‘for thou hast made us for thyself and restless is our heart until it comes to rest in thee.’⁴⁸ And he constructs the Christian experience as a restless journey as we walk through the city of man into the city of God guided by the

⁴⁶ *Confessions* p 145.

⁴⁷ Weinrich p 72.

⁴⁸ *Confessions* p 13.

shepherd. Yes, there is a role for us to play in discipling, but it is ultimately God's work.

“God said, Let there be light, and there was light. And God saw the light that it was good.” If, then, we ask who made it, it was “God.” If, by what means, He said “Let it be,” and it was. If we ask, why He made it, “it was good.” Neither is there any author more excellent than God, nor any skill more efficacious than the word of God, nor any cause better than that good might be created by the good God.⁴⁹

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⁴⁹ *City of God* p 502.

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