

Abide in the True Vine (John 15:1-12): Augustine's Figurative Interpretation, Hermeneutics of Love, and Invitation to Abide in Christ the Mediator

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Abstrak

Studi Agustinian belakangan ini menunjukkan maraknya interest pada tafsir Agustinus atas Injil Yohanes. Namun tak banyak diskusi berkembang terkait dengan inter-relasi antara tafsir figuratif, hermeneutik cinta, dan pengajaran Agustinus tentang Kristus sebagai pengantara. Dalam riset ini, penulis akan menunjukkan relasi antara tafsir figuratif dan hermeneutik cinta Agustinus, berdasarkan tafsirnya atas narasi pokok dan carang-carang anggur. Paper ini akan menganalisis pengajaran sentral Agustinus atas Yohanes 15:1-12 dalam *Tractates* 80-83 tentang tinggal dalam Kristus sebagai pengantara.

Kata-Kata Kunci: Agustinus, Injil Yohanes, tafsir figuratif, hermeneutik cinta

Abstract

Recent Augustinian studies display growing interests in Augustine's interpretation of the Gospel of John. However, there are few discussions regarding the interrelationship between Augustine's figurative interpretation, his hermeneutics of love, and his teaching on Christ as the mediator. In this research, I will demonstrate the interrelationship between Augustine's figurative interpretation and his hermeneutics of love based on his interpretation of the vine and the branches. This paper will analyze the central teaching of the abiding in Christ as mediator in Augustine's *Tractates* 80-83 on John 15:1-12.

Keywords: Augustine, Gospel of John, figurative interpretation, hermeneutics of love

A broad spectrum of current Augustine scholars show persistent interest in Augustine's hermeneutics.¹ Some of them focus their

discussions on the rule of Tyconius,² Augustine's hermeneutics of love,³ figurative inter-

¹ Brett W. Smith, "Complex Authorial Intention in Augustine's Hermeneutics," *Augustinian Studies* 45, no. 2 (2014): 203-225; Frederick Van Fleteren, "Principles of Augustine's Hermeneutic: An Overview," in *Augustine Biblical Exegesis*, ed. Frederick Van Fleteren, Joseph C. Schnaubelt (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 1-32; Gordon J. Hamilton, "Augustine's Methods of Biblical Interpretation," in *Grace, Politics and Desire: Essay on Augustine*, ed. H.A. Maynell (Calgary, Alberta: University of Calgary Press, 1990), 103-119; Tarmo Toom, "Augustine on Scripture," in *T&T Clark Companion to Augustine and Modern Theology*, eds. C. C.

Pecknold and Tarmo Toom (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 75-90.

² Charles Kannengiesser, "Augustine and Tyconius: A Conflict of Christian Hermeneutics in Roman Africa," in *Augustine and the Bible*, ed. and trans. Pamela Bright (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), 149-177; Pamela Bright, "The Preponderating Influence of Augustine: A Study of the Epitomes of the Book of Rules of the Donatist Tyconius," in *Augustine and the Bible*, ed. and trans. Pamela Bright (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), 109-128.

³ Christine Mason Sutherland, "Love as Rhetoric Principle: The Relationship Between Content and Style in the Rhetoric of St. Augustine," in *Grace, Politics and Desire*,

pretations,⁴ or his Christological hermeneutics.⁵

Current Augustine scholars are showing interest in Augustine's interpretation of the Gospel of John,⁶ especially his discussions of the Trinity,⁷ the Holy Spirit,⁸ John's pro-

logue,⁹ John 21, and the 153 fishes.¹⁰ Some scholars also give attention to the role of Christ as the mediator between God and man in Augustine's theology.¹¹ There is much scholarship on Augustine's figurative interpretation, hermeneutics of love, his interpretation on the gospel of John, and his fundamental point on the role of Christ the mediator, but after thorough and intense study, I do not find any scholars of Augustine who discuss the interrelationship between Augustine's figurative interpretation, his hermeneutics of love, and his point on Christ the mediator. This paper argues that Augustine's interpretation of the vine and the branches in his *Tractates on the Gospel of John, Tractates 80-83* on John 15:1-12 [hereafter *Tractates*] shows the interrelationship between Augustine's figurative interpretation and his hermeneutics

139-154; Ernest L. Fortin, "Augustine and the Hermeneutics of Love: Some Preliminary Consideration," in *Augustine Today*, ed. Richard John Neuhaus (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1993), 35-59.

⁴ Curtis W. Freeman, "Figure and History: A Contemporary Reassessment of Augustine's Hermeneutic," in *Augustine: Presbyter Factus Sum*, volume 2 of *Collectanea Augustiniana*, eds. Joseph T. Linehard, Earl C. Muller, and Roland J. Teske (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 319-329; Robert W. Bernard, "The Rhetoric of God in the Figurative Exegesis of Augustine," in *Biblical Hermeneutics in Historical Perspective: Studies in Honor of Karlfried Froehlich on His Sixtieth Birthday*, eds. M. S. Burrows and Paul Rorem (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 88-99; Tarmo Toom, "Augustine's Case for the Multiplicity of Meanings," *Augustinian Studies* 45, no. 2 (2014): 183-201.

⁵ Michael Cameron describes the figure of speech behind Augustine's theology of Christ the mediator. Michael Cameron, "The Christological Substructure of Augustine's Figurative Exegesis," in *Augustine and the Bible*, 88). Tarmo Toom describes Christ's humanity as a fundamental sign of God that leads believers to know God through Christ the man [Tarmo Toom, *Thought Clothed with Sound: Augustine's Christological Hermeneutics in De doctrina Christiana*, volume 4 of *International Theological Studies* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2002).

⁶ Adam D. Ployd, "The Unity of the Dove: The Sixth Homily on the Gospel of John and Augustine's Trinitarian Solution to the Donatist Schism," *Augustinian Studies* 42, no. 1 (2011): 57-77; Eoin Cassidy, "Per Christum Hominem ad Christum Deum: Augustine's Homilies on John's Gospel," in *Studies in Patristic Christology* (Dublin: Four Courts, 1998), 122-143; H. A. G. Houghton, *Augustine's Text of John: Patristic Citations and Latin Gospel Manuscripts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); John Norris, "Augustine and Sign in *Tractatus in Iohannis Euangelium*," in *Augustine Biblical Exegesis*, eds. Frederick Van Flateren and Joseph C. Schnaubelt (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 215-231; John Norris, "The Theological Structure of Augustine's Exegesis in the *Tractatus in Iohannis Euangelium*," in *Augustine: Presbyter Factus Sum*, volume 2 of *Collectanea Augustiniana*, eds. Joseph T. Linehard, Earl C. Muller, and Roland J. Teske (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 385-394.

⁷ Evan F. Kuehn, "The Johannine Logic of Augustine's Trinity: A Dogmatic," *Theological Studies* 68 (2007): 572-594; Keith E. Johnson, "Augustine's 'Trinitarian' Reading of John 5: A Model for the Theological Interpretation of Scripture?," *JETS* 52, no. 1 (December, 2009): 799-810.

⁸ Robert Louis Wilken, "Spiritus sanctus secundum scripturas sanctas: Exegetical Considerations of Augustine on the Holy Spirit," *Augustinian Studies* 31, no. 1 (2000): 1-18.

⁹ Maico Michielin, "Augustine's Interpretation of John's Prologue: A Theology of God's Word," *Theology Today* 67 (2010): 299-307; Michael Heintz, "The Immateriality and Eternity of the Word in St. Augustine's Sermons on the Prologue of John's Gospel," in *Augustine: Presbyter Factus Sum*, volume 2 of *Collectanea Augustiniana*, eds. Joseph T. Linehard, Earl C. Muller, and Roland J. Teske (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 395-402.

¹⁰ J. A. Emerton, "The Hundred and Fifty-Three Fishes in John XXI. 11," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 9, no. 1 (April 1958): 86-89; George Lawless, "Augustine's use of rhetoric in his interpretation of John 21," *Augustinian Studies* 23 (1992): 53-67.

¹¹ Ronnie Rombs describes Christ's priestly work of mediation, making intercession for us and revealing divine humility and love [Ronnie Rombs, "Augustine on Christ," in *T&T Clark Companion to Augustine and Modern Theology*, 41-47]. Linda Darwish describes the role of Christ the mediator as a person who is a "fully divine and fully human" in the trinity [Linda Darwish, "The concept of the mediator in Augustine's understanding of the Trinity." *Didaskalia* 13, no. 1 (Fall 2001): 61-86]. Louis H. Mackey describes "the paradox of signs and its resolution in the *De Magistro*." [Louis Henry Mackey, "The Mediator Mediated: Faith and Reason in Augustine's *De Magistro*," *Franciscan Studies* 42 (1982): 136]; Brian E. Delay describes Christ's incarnation as a revelation of the humility of Christ as "the most fundamental truth in the Gospel of salvation." [Brian E. Daley, "A Humble Mediator: The Distinctive Elements in Saint Augustine's Christology," in *Word and Spirit: A Monastic Review* 9: St. Augustine (Petersham, Massachusetts: St. Bede's Publications, 1987), 105-108]; Deborah Wallace Ruddy describes Christ the humble mediator as an example of humility [Deborah Wallace Ruddy, "The Humble God: Healer, Mediator, and Sacrifice," *Logos* 7, no. 3 (Summer 2004): 93-99].

of love, which are centered around the teaching of abiding in Christ the mediator.

Augustine's Figurative Interpretation of John 15:1-12

This section analyzes the application of Augustine's figurative interpretation as described in *De Doctrina Christiana* to his *Tractates* 80-83. In short, Augustine's distinction between "signs" and "things"¹² in *De Doctrina Christiana* is the foundation upon which he builds his figurative interpretation.¹³ He argues that readers should not focus their attention on the signs themselves, but on the thing they signify.¹⁴ Augustine also explains that many times, biblical teaching is delivered "by way of simile and comparisons"¹⁵ to attract readers and provide them with more pleasure and enjoyment.¹⁶ Augustine applies this approach in his *Tractates on the Gospel of John*.¹⁷ In his sermons in *Tractates* 80-83 especially, Augustine strongly connects his

figurative interpretation, hermeneutic of love, and his teaching on the role of Christ as the mediator. *Tractates* 80-83 highlight the role of Christ as the mediator to emphasize the total dependence of believers on Christ the vine. For Augustine, Christ the mediator is the source of life and the channel of God's love and grace. Through him believers receive life and the capacity to be fruitful. Augustine structures his sermons in *Tractates* 80-83 as follows: [1] Abide in the True Vine (*Tractate* 80: *John* 15:1-3); [2] Abide in Me (*Tractate* 81: *John* 15:4-7); [3] Abide in My Love (*Tractate* 82: *John* 15:8-10); and [4] Abide in My Commandment of Love (*Tractate* 83: *John* 15:11-12). With this outline, he invites and teaches his readers/audience to abide in Christ the mediator through abiding in Christ's commandment of love. A more detailed description of his outline follows:

John 15:1-3 (Tractate 80): *Abide in the True Vine*

First of all, according to Augustine, the metaphor of the true vine and the branches points to the role of Christ as the mediator between God and men. Abiding in him is a necessity for believers.¹⁸ For Augustine, this metaphor is beyond the literal sense. In the *De Doctrina Christiana*, Augustine warns Bible interpreters to be cautious about taking a figurative expression literally.¹⁹ Likewise, here, the expression "I am the true vine" is a metaphor.²⁰ "I am the true vine," (*John* 15:1) is not intended as a proper designation.²¹

¹² Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, trans. R. P. H. Green (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Augustine, *Teaching Christianity*, trans. Edmund Hill (Hyde Park, New York: New City, 1996) [hereafter *De Doctrina Christiana*], l.iii.2.

¹³ Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, II.x.15.

¹⁴ Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, II.i.1. Augustine mentions figurative interpretation in his other writings such as *Confessions*. In the *Confessions* Augustine describes how a figurative interpretation led him to God [As examples see Augustine, *The Confessions*, trans. Maria Boulding (Hyde Park, New York: New City, 1997), III.v.9; V.xiv.24; VI.iv.6; VI.v.8; VI.xi.8].

¹⁵ Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, II.xvi.24.

¹⁶ For Augustine, that "everything is ready to hand, often start wilting out of sheer boredom," and the writers of the Bible avoided these maladies [Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, II.vi.8]. But because biblical teachings are delivered "under a figurative manner of speech" they bring a "sweeter taste" to readers when "they are finally unpacked" [Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, IV.vii.15].

¹⁷ In his *Tractate on the Gospel of John*, several times Augustine explicitly mentions that he uses figurative interpretation to analyze the deeper meaning of metaphors in the Gospel of John. [Augustine, *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series I, volume 7, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Hendrickson, 1994); Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, trans. John W. Rettig (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1994)]. See Augustine comments on *John* 1:6; 3:11; 8:11; 10:6; 11:3, 8; 15:1; 16:3; and 19:4.

¹⁸ Augustine, *Tractate* 80 on *John* 15:1-3, 1(1).

¹⁹ According to Augustine, interpreters should beware of enslavement to the letter, as mentioned in 2 Corinthians 3:6: "The letter kills, but the spirit gives life." According to Augustine, if biblical interpreters take signs for things, unaware of what the signs signify, and interpret figurative expressions literally, they will be enslaved by their carnal way of thinking, subjected to the "carnal burden and veil," and trapped in "wretched slavery of the spirit." As a result, they will surround their interpretation with "the noose of error," and "being unable to lift up the eyes of the mind above bodily creatures," will not "drink in the eternal light." [Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, III.v.7, 9; III.viii.12].

²⁰ One of many metaphors for Jesus. He is also called "a sheep, a lamb, a lion, a rock, a cornerstone, and other things

Commenting on “my Father is the cultivator” (John 15:1), Augustine expands the meaning of the cultivator to the Trinity,²² and then focuses his point on the role of Christ as the cleanser who works together with the Father as the sanctifier.²³ In other words, Christ as the vine is in union with the branches, but he is also in union with the Father as the Cultivator. In this figurative interpretation, Augustine interprets “abide in the vine” as abide in Christ the vine/mediator as he describes further in John 15:4-7.

John 15:4-7 (Tractate 81): Abide in Me

Commenting on “abide in me, and I in you” (John 15:4), Augustine highlights the total dependence of the branches on the vine. He explains that the branches are attached to the vine for their own benefit.²⁴ The vine does not take anything from the branches, and the branches “do not supply [anything] to the vine.” The branches receive from the vine the means of life. The unity of the vine and the branches is necessary for the branches but not for the vine.²⁵ Augustine interprets John 15:4, “As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither [can]

of this sort.” [Augustine, *Tractate 80* on John 15:1-3, 1(2)]. According to Augustine, this metaphor is comparable to the metaphor of Christ as “the Head of the Church” and we are “his members.” [Augustine, *Tractate 80* on John 15:1-3, 1(1)]. This metaphor also serves to contrast Jesus with the “strange vine ... which was expected to produce the grape, but [which] produced thorns” (Jeremiah 2:21, LXX). [Augustine, *Tractate 80* on John 15:1-3, 1(2)].

²¹ Augustine, *Tractate 80* on John 15:1-3, 2(2).

²² Augustine, *Tractate 80* on John 15:1-3, 2(2).

²³ According to Augustine, believers are “clean of course, and yet in need of cleansing. For neither, were they not clean, could they have borne fruit, and yet everyone who bears fruit, the cultivator trims clean that he may bring forth even more fruit. He bears fruit because he is clean; and that he may bring it forth even more, he is still more trimmed clean. For who in this life is so clean that he does not need to be more and more cleansed? Let him indeed cleanse the clean, that is, the fruitful that they may be as much more fruitful as they are cleaner.” [Augustine, *Tractate 80* on John 15:1-3, 2(3)].

²⁴ Augustine, *Tractate 81* on John 15:4-7, 1(1).

²⁵ Further Augustine states, “when a branch has been cut off, another can sprout from the living root; but one that has been cut off cannot live without the root.” [Augustine, *Tractate 81* on John 15:4-7, 1(1)].

you unless you abide in me,”²⁶ with this expressive comment: “For he who supposes that he has any fruit of himself is not in the vine. He who is not in the vine is not in Christ. He who is not in Christ is not a Christian.”²⁷

Based on John 15:5, “I am ... the vine, and you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, this one bears much fruit; for without me you can do nothing,” Augustine argues that there is no room for anybody to think that “a branch can bear at least some little fruit of itself,” because unless the branch “remains in the vine and lives from the root, it cannot bear even a slight amount of fruit itself.”²⁸

Augustine continues his commentary based on John 15:6, “If anyone does not abide in me, he will be cast forth as a branch, and shall wither, and they shall gather him up and cast him into the fire, and he burns.” He argues that there are no other choices for the branches: either attach to the vine or be cast to fire.²⁹ A branch cut off from the vine “produces no beneficial uses for the cultivators, it is destined for no artisan’s works,”³⁰ while a branch attached to the vine, “even if [it] produces a little, the cultivator cleanses it that it may produce more.”³¹

Commenting on John 15:7, “If you abide in me ... and my words abide in you, you shall ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you,” Augustine explains that in this world, believers live between opposing tensions – abide in Christ or abide in the world.³² We abide in Christ who, when we ask, “only does

²⁶ Augustine, *Tractate 81* on John 15:4-7, 2(1-2).

²⁷ Augustine, *Tractate 81* on John 15:4-7, 2(2).

²⁸ Augustine, *Tractate 81* on John 15:4-7, 3(1).

²⁹ Augustine, *Tractate 81* on John 15:4-7, 3(3).

³⁰ Augustine, *Tractate 81* on John 15:4-7, 3(3).

³¹ Augustine, *Tractate 81* on John 15:4-7, 3(1).

³² Augustine explains, “For indeed we will one thing because we are in Christ, and will another because we are still in the world. For, from our abiding in this world, sometimes a thought creeps into our minds to ask for that which we do not realize is inexpedient for us.” [Augustine, *Tractate 81* on John 15:4-7, 4(1)].

what is expedient for us.”³³ To abide in Christ and his word requires more than just keeping his word in memory. It requires that Christ’s word should abide in the hearts and actions of believers. Abiding in Christ and his word is a necessity.

*John 15:8-10 (Tractate 82):
Abide in My Love*

Commenting on John 15:8, Augustine explains that the Father is honored by the believers’ abundant fruit of good works. But these fruits are not their own achievement. Believers bear much fruit because they are created in Christ the vine. Their success is rooted in God’s grace, and this grace “belongs to him.” So believers should not attribute their fruits to their own ability.³⁴

Drawing from John 15:9, “As the Father has loved me ... I also loved you,” Augustine explains that believers’ fruits are rooted in the love of the Father for them in Christ. Believers can bear the fruit of good works because the love of the Father is flowing to Christ, and then from Christ to them. Only by being rooted in the love of the Father in Christ can believers bear fruit.³⁵

Commenting further on John 15:9 and following the flow of John’s gospel texts, Augustine raises this question: How shall we abide in Christ’s love? And he answers, “If you keep my commandment ... you will abide in my love.” Then he raises his next logical question: “Does love cause the keeping of the commandments or does the act of keeping the commandments cause love?” To this he answers that nobody can deny the priority of love. Then he highlights his main point – Someone who is destitute of love “has no true ground for keeping the commandments.”³⁶ Love is shown by keeping the commandments, not stimulated by keeping

the commandments.³⁷ There is no room for believers to deceive themselves by saying that they love Jesus but do not keep his commandments. For Augustine, “we love him insofar as we keep his commandments” and “the less we keep them, the less we love.”³⁸

Closing *Tractate 82*, Augustine clarifies the meaning of “abide in my love.” For Augustine, Christ’s command to “abide in my love” means “abide in my grace!”³⁹ According to Augustine, in this pericope Jesus is “more and more commending the grace by which we are saved.”⁴⁰ And then he concludes his homily on John 15:8-10 by meditating on the mystery of God’s grace, which flows to the believer through Christ the mediator.⁴¹

In sum, commenting on John 15:8-10, Augustine develops a figurative interpretation that describes the deeper meaning of abiding in Christ as abiding in Christ’s love. Believers can bear fruit only by abiding in Christ the vine/the mediator. Next, in *Tractate 83*, Augustine describes the deeper meaning of abiding in Christ’s love as abiding in Christ’s commandment of love.

*John 15:11-12 (Tractate 83):
Abide in My Commandment of Love*

Commenting on John 15:11, “These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and your joy may be filled,” Augustine says that Jesus’ joy in the believers is pure grace.⁴² His joy was already and always

³⁷ For Augustine, the commandment is “not the source from which love is engendered,” but rather is “the means by which it is shown.” [Augustine, *Tractate 82* on John 15:8-10, 3(1)].

³⁸ Augustine, *Tractate 82* on John 15:8-10, 3(1).

³⁹ Augustine, *Tractate 82* on John 15:8-10, 3(2).

⁴⁰ Augustine, *Tractate 82* on John 15:8-10, 1(1).

⁴¹ Meditating on this, Augustine states, “For what is he, even as man, but that God is his ‘lifter up’? For the Word was God, the Only-begotten, co-eternal with Him that begat; but that He might be given to us as Mediator, by grace ineffable, ‘the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.’” [Augustine, *Tractate 82* on John 15:8-10, 4(3)].

⁴² Further Augustine describes the joy of Jesus as eternal, [Augustine, *Tractate 83* on John 15:11-12, 1(1)] and never at any time imperfect, [Augustine, *Tractate 83* on John

³³ Augustine, *Tractate 81* on John 15:4-7, 4(1).

³⁴ Augustine, *Tractate 82* on John 15:8-10, 1(2).

³⁵ Augustine, *Tractate 82* on John 15:8-10, 2(2).

³⁶ Augustine, *Tractate 82* on John 15:8-10, 3(1).

full from the time when believers were predestined for salvation.⁴³

Commenting on John 15:12, "This is ... my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you," Augustine refers back to John 13:34 - "A new command I give you." This commandment is called "new" to alert believers that it differs from the old ways of obedience which are based on work/merit. Jesus highlights this command as "my commandment" to emphasize its importance, so it will be appreciated by his disciples.⁴⁴ For the rest of his interpretation of John 15:11-12, Augustine highlights love as the greatest commandment and the fulfillment of the law. By this interpretation Augustine admonishes believers to love one another for the purpose of loving God, and to love God in order to love one another.⁴⁵

In sum, Augustine reads John 15:1-12 with a paradigm that the vine is a metaphor for Christ, the mediator between God and believers. This interpretation is constructed by a figurative interpretation, reaches its peak in love and grace, and is centered on the role of Christ as the mediator.⁴⁶ In John 15:1-12, Christ invites believers to abide in him, in his love, and in his commandment of love. Furthermore, the readers of *Tractates* 80-83 can understand Augustine's message through the hermeneutics of love.

15:11-12, 1(2)] because God's happiness, which "had been no less without us, does not become greater from us." [Augustine, *Tractate* 83 on John 15:11-12, 2(2)].

⁴³ Augustine, *Tractate* 83 on John 15:11-12, 1(2); 1(3). The joy of believers increases progressively from when they are born again until finally it is fulfilled in their resurrection [Augustine, *Tractate* 83: *On John 15:8-10*, 1(3)].

⁴⁴ Augustine, *Tractate* 83 on John 15:11-12, 2(1).

⁴⁵ Augustine, *Tractate* 83 on John 15:11-12, 2(1-3).

⁴⁶ Through this figurative interpretation Augustine highlights his point that believers are totally dependent on Christ the vine - the mediator and the source of life. Without abiding in Christ, believers cannot live, cannot bear fruit, can do nothing, and their prayers are not heard by God. But in Christ, they receive every blessing from the Father. In Christ, God's love and grace are proclaimed.

Augustine's Hermeneutics of Love on John 15:1-12

This section analyzes how Augustine applies his hermeneutics of love as described in *De Doctrina Christiana* in his *Tractates* 80-83. According to Augustine's hermeneutics of love, "the fulfillment and the end of the law and of all the divine scripture is love."⁴⁷ And as a consequence, the purpose of biblical interpretation is to love and enjoy the Holy Trinity (as the true object of enjoyment) and to love our neighbor as our self.⁴⁸ Consistent with this principle, Augustine states, "Anyone who thinks that he has understood the divine scriptures or any part of them, but cannot by his understanding build up this double love of God and neighbor, has not yet succeeded in understanding them."⁴⁹

Through his hermeneutics of love, Augustine interprets and establishes the centrality of Christ's commandment of love in John 15:12.⁵⁰ This verse, Augustine explains, makes it clear that "love is the fulfillment of the law" and God's other commandments are included in the commandment of love. He demonstrates the linkage between love and commandment in John 15:10.⁵¹ Additionally, he points out the tension between the priority of the commandment and the priority of love, before concluding that the priority of love is paramount.⁵²

In his hermeneutics of love, Augustine emphasizes the priority of love that surpasses

⁴⁷ Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, I. xxxv.39; Lxxvi.27.

⁴⁸ Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, I.v.4, 5, 6; Lxxxv.39.

⁴⁹ Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, Lxxxv.40. In more detail, Augustine explains what he means by love as, "any urge of the spirit to find joy in God for this own sake, and in oneself and one's neighbor for God's sake." [Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, III.x.16].

⁵⁰ Here Augustine states, "let us consider what the same Apostle says: "Love is the fulfillment of the law." Where there is love, therefore, what is there that can be lacking? But where it is not, what is there that can be profitable? A demon believes and yet does not love; no one loves who does not believe" [Augustine, *Tractate* 83 on John 15:11-12, 3(2)].

⁵¹ Augustine, *Tractate* 82 on John 15:8-10, 4(3).

⁵² Augustine, *Tractate* 82 on John 15:8-10, 1(3).

faith and hope.⁵³ He applies this principle to interpret John 15:12. Commenting on this verse, Augustine explains that the apostle recommends three things, “faith, hope, and love,” then concludes “but the greatest of these is love.”⁵⁴ The commandment of love includes the two other commandments of faith and hope.⁵⁵ The priority of love means that “whatever else he commanded, we shall do; for whatever else there is, we have here.”⁵⁶

In his hermeneutics of love, Augustine draws a clear line that the twofold imperative of love – to love God and to love neighbors – must be implemented in the right order.⁵⁷ The imperative to love one another and the calling to love our own selves is not the final destination of love. They are to be loved for the sake of something else – that is God.⁵⁸ God should be loved more than any other thing, “more than any human being,” and “more than ourselves.” All other things should be loved for God’s sake.⁵⁹ Everything that believers receive should be focused on God and devoted to God.⁶⁰ The

commandment to love and enjoy God for God’s own sake also covers the commandment to love our neighbor and ourselves.⁶¹ When the love of God is put first, love fulfills its highest purpose, so that “everything else is to converge on it.”⁶² And likewise, if believers are to properly love their neighbors, they must also love God with all their heart, all their soul, and all their mind.⁶³ Augustine applies this principle to interpret John 15:11-12. These verses show us that “where love of neighbor is, there necessarily is love of God.”⁶⁴ For if believers fail to love God, they also fail to love their neighbor as themselves.⁶⁵ For Augustine, if someone does not love God, he/she does not love his/her neighbor, and he/she does not love even himself/herself.⁶⁶

Based on the principle of the right order of love, Augustine develops his teaching on true Christian fellowship/friendship.⁶⁷ In this true Christian fellowship, “other people must not take offense if you also love them for God’s sake and not their own.”⁶⁸ Augustine applies

⁵³ Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, I.xxxvii.41.

⁵⁴ Augustine, *Tractate 83* on John 15:11-12, 3(1).

⁵⁵ Augustine, *Tractate 83* on John 15:11-12, 3(2); 3(3).

⁵⁶ Augustine, *Tractate 83* on John 15:11-12, 3(3).

⁵⁷ Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, I.xxvi.27; I.xxvii.28. By this right order, believers “do not love what is not to be loved,” do not “fail to love what is to be loved,” and do not “have a greater love for what should be loved less, or an equal love for things that should be loved less or more, or a lesser or greater love for things that should be loved equally.” [Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, I.xxvii.28].

⁵⁸ Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, I.xxii.20. Furthermore, according to Augustine, our love to neighbors and self is to some extent defective when “they are not relating themselves to God,” and “they are not turning to anything unchangeable,” but are loved and enjoyed solely for themselves and for their own sakes. For Augustine, “they are better when they cleave to the unchangeable good and are tightly bound to it, than when they release themselves from it to cling even to themselves.” So the love of neighbor and self should be directed to God. [Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, I.xxii.21].

⁵⁹ Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, I.xxvii.28

⁶⁰ Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, I.xxii.21. Further according to Augustine, this is the imperative to love God with one’s whole heart, whole soul, and whole mind. In this command, there is not “any part of our life, which could be left vacant.” In this direction of love, there is no “room for wanting to enjoy something else.” And further according to Augustine, whatever else “occurs as fit to be loved must be

whisked along toward that point to which the whole impetus of your love is hastening.” [Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, I.xxii.21].

⁶¹ Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, I.xxii.21.

⁶² Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, I.xxvi.27. Augustine explains in greater detail, “So all who love their neighbors in the right way ought so to deal with them that they too love God with all their heart, all their soul, all their mind. By loving them, you see, in this way as themselves, they are relating all their love of themselves and of the others to that love of God, which allows no channel to be led off from itself that will diminish its own flow” [Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, I.xxii.21]. And also, “When indeed love of God is put first, and the manner of that love is clearly prescribed, indicating that everything else is to converge on it, nothing seems to be said about love of yourself by yourself. But when it says, *You shall love your neighbor as yourself*, love of yourself by yourself is being simultaneously included.” [Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, I.xxvi.27].

⁶³ Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, I.xxii.21

⁶⁴ Augustine, *Tractate 83* on John 15:11-12, 3(2).

⁶⁵ Augustine, *Tractate 83: On John 15:11-13*, 2(2).

⁶⁶ Augustine, *Tractate 83* on John 15:11-12, 3(2).

⁶⁷ In true Christian fellowship there is a calling to love God in community. In this community, we are called to love other people more than our own bodies because we can enjoy God together with other people but we cannot enjoy God with our physical body [Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, I.xxvii.28].

⁶⁸ Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, I.xxii.21

this principle to interpret John 15:11-12. Here, Augustine explains, believers should love one another for “the purpose of possessing God,” and love God in order to love one another,⁶⁹ as well as in order to love their own soul.⁷⁰ Surely there are only a few people who have this motive for love, but in this fellowship “God may be all in all.”⁷¹

The vital relationship between ‘abide in my love’ and ‘abide in my grace’ is the final result of Augustine’s interpretation of John 15:1-12.⁷² For Augustine, the branch (believer) abides in Christ and bears fruit solely because of God’s love and grace.⁷³ God’s love and grace are the reason Christ takes joy in believers.⁷⁴ God’s love/grace is the reason behind the empowerment of believers to keep the commandment of love and do good works.⁷⁵ No one can live without God’s grace,⁷⁶ and the grace of God is the foundation for our calling to “let us love God because he first loved us” (1 Jn. 4:19).⁷⁷ Abiding in God’ grace and love, Christians are called to be humble and give glory in return to God.⁷⁸ This grace is “accessible to the humble, but hidden from the proud.”⁷⁹ This grace “instructs the hearts of the humble,” and “stops up the mouths of the proud.”⁸⁰

Upon analysis, Augustine clearly applies his hermeneutics of love and figurative interpretation as described in *De Doctrina Christiana* consistently in *Tractates* 80-83. They are connected to one another, and centered on his teaching on the role of Christ as the mediator as we will analyze further.

⁶⁹ Augustine, *Tractate* 83 on John 15:11-12, 2(1); 3(3);

⁷⁰ Augustine, *Tractate* 83 on John 15:11-12, 2(2).

⁷¹ Augustine, *Tractate* 83: *On John 15:11-1*, 3(3).

⁷² Augustine, *Tractate* 82 on John 15:8-10, 3(2).

⁷³ Augustine, *Tractate* 81 on John 15:4-7, 2(1); Augustine, *Tractate* 82 on John 15:8-10, 1(2).

⁷⁴ Augustine, *Tractate* 83 on John 15:11-12, 1(1).

⁷⁵ Augustine, *Tractate* 82 on John 15:8-10, 3(2); 2(1).

⁷⁶ Augustine, *Tractate* 81 on John 15:4-7, 3(2).

⁷⁷ Augustine, *Tractate* 82 on John 15:8-10, 2(1).

⁷⁸ Augustine, *Tractate* 82 on John 15:8-10, 1(2).

⁷⁹ Augustine, *Tractate* 82 on John 15:8-10, 3(2).

⁸⁰ Augustine, *Tractate* 81 on John 15:4-7, 1(2).

Invitation to Abide in Christ the Mediator in John 15:1-12

In the *De Doctrina Christiana*, Augustine puts Christ’s incarnation and the sign of the cross of Christ as the center of all Christian activity.⁸¹ Christ takes flesh to himself in order to dwell amongst us and open the way for believers to reach the Father.⁸² According to Augustine, God is revealed to believers by “appearing to mortals in mortal flesh.”⁸³ By knowing and loving Christ, believers “*may be filled with all the fullness of God.*”⁸⁴ Augustine interprets the meaning of John 14:6, “I am the way, the truth, and the life,” as a challenge, invitation and proclamation that “you come by me, you come to me, you abide in me.” Christ is equal with the Father, and through him the Father is revealed. In their union with Christ, believers reach the Father. In Christ, the Holy Spirit binds and glues, cements and seals believers to “abide forever in the supreme and unchangeable good.”⁸⁵ The centrality of Christ signifies his role as the mediator between God and man.

Likewise, Augustine in his *Tractates on the Gospel of John* highlights the role of Christ as the mediator. His argument can be summarized in three points. First, Christ is the incarnate God.⁸⁶ Through his incarnation, he became flesh and appeared as a man.⁸⁷ As a man, he is the Creator and the mediator.⁸⁸ As the mediator, he lives in an intermediate

⁸¹ Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, I.xv.14; I.xvii.16; I.xxxiv.38; IV.xx.39; II.xli.62.

⁸² Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, I.xiii.1

⁸³ Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, I.xii.12.

⁸⁴ Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, II.lxi.62.

⁸⁵ Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, I.xxxiv.38.

⁸⁶ In his incarnation he was “humbled by the passion, glorified by his resurrection” [Augustine, *Tractate* 104: *On John 17:1*, 3(2)]. In order to stir believers to the highest, he suffered with believers in the lowest [Augustine, *Tractate* 52: *On John 12:27-36*, 1(1)]. The only reason for his incarnation is because of God’s grace [Augustine, *Tractate* 26: *On John 6:41-59*, 19(3); *Tractate* 74: *On John 14:15-17*, 3(1)].

⁸⁷ Augustine, *Tractate* 16: *On John 4:43-53*, 7(2); *Tractate* 109: *On John 17:20*, 2 (3); *Tractate* 119: *On John 19:24-30*, 4(1).

⁸⁸ Augustine, *Tractate* 98: *On John 16:12*, 6(2).

position between God and man.⁸⁹ Once located there in between, he became the only gate to the Father,⁹⁰ and the only way to God's mercy, love and salvation.⁹¹ Through him believers become members of his body.⁹² Second, Christ is the reconciling mediator. He is the Priest who has become the sacrifice.⁹³ In Christ, believers are predestined, reconciled, redeemed, justified, regenerated, saved, and freed from evil, and they receive the Holy Spirit as a pledge.⁹⁴ Those who deny Christ the mediator are not saved,⁹⁵ but those who receive him are reconciled with God and enjoy union with God as the "perfect blessedness."⁹⁶ Third, He is the embodiment and the revelation of the twofold imperative of love and the instructor of the twofold commandment of love.⁹⁷

Augustine applies the centrality of Christ as mediator in his figurative interpretation of John 15:1-12.⁹⁸ Within his *Tractates* 80-83, Augustine strongly highlights the role of Christ as the "mediator between God and men"⁹⁹ as a central point of his interpretation. Augustine explains that Christ is "the Vine with us" and "the Cultivator with the Father."¹⁰⁰ As the vine with us, he is the source of life which gives growth to the branches from within.¹⁰¹ As the cultivator with the Father, he also becomes "the cleanser

of the branches."¹⁰² In order to be the mediator for believers, he became a man so he could be the vine for the branches.¹⁰³

Augustine says in *Tractates* 80-83 that believers have everything in Christ the vine, but without Christ, they can do nothing. This is the core message upon which Augustine structures his homilies on John 15:1-12 and invites his hearers to abide in Christ the mediator. This is a calling to abide in the true vine, in Christ, in Christ's love, and finally in Christ's commandment of love. The invitation of these homilies is framed by his figurative interpretation, hermeneutics of love, and the centrality of the role of Christ as the mediator between God and man.

Conclusion

Two of the primary tools Augustine uses for biblical analysis are figurative interpretation and his hermeneutic of love. Augustine describes these tools in *De Doctrina Christiana*. Consistently Augustine applies his figurative interpretation and hermeneutics of love in his *Tractates* 80-83.

Figuratively, Augustine interprets the vine of John 15 as a metaphor for Christ the mediator between God and believers. He is the vine/the mediator/the source of life for believers. In him, believers receive every blessing from the Father. He is the mediator of God's love and grace. Through his divinity and humanity, the love and grace of God the Father flow to humankind. By the love and grace of the Father in Christ, believers live, being enabled to respond to Christ's invitation to abide in him, abide in his love,

⁸⁹ Augustine, *Tractate* 121: On John 20:10-29, 3(1).

⁹⁰ Augustine, *Tractate* 47: On John 10:14-21, 3(3).

⁹¹ Augustine, *Tractate* 52: On John 12:27-36, 2(2).

⁹² Augustine, *Tractate* 108: On John 17:14-19, 5(1).

⁹³ Augustine, *Tractate* 41: On John 8:31-36, 5(3).

⁹⁴ Augustine, *Tractate* 53: On John 12:37-43; *Tractate* 124: On John 21:19-25, 5(1); *Tractate* 105: On John 17:1-5, 7(1); *Tractate* 98: On John 16:12, 7(1) (3).

⁹⁵ Augustine, *Tractate* 66: On John 13:36-38, 2(1).

⁹⁶ Augustine, *Tractate* 110: On John 17:21-23, 4(1).

⁹⁷ Augustine, *Tractate* 17: On John 5:1-18, 7(1).

⁹⁸ The significance of the role of Christ as the mediator between God and man also appears in other works of Augustine, such, *The Augustine Catechism: The Enchiridion on Faith, Hope, and Charity* (Hyde Park, New York: New City, 1999), X.33; XIV.48; XVI.61; XXIII.92; XXVIII.108; Augustine, *Confessions*, X.xlii.67; X.xliii.68; XI.ii.4; XI.xxix.39.

⁹⁹ Augustine, *Tractate* 80 on John 15:1-3, 1(1).

¹⁰⁰ Augustine, *Tractate* 80 on John 15:1-3, 3(3).

¹⁰¹ Augustine, *Tractate* 80 on John 15:1-3, 2(1).

¹⁰² Augustine, *Tractate* 80 on John 15:1-3, 2(2-3).

¹⁰³ Augustine, *Tractate* 80 on John 15:1-3, 1(1). In more detail Augustine explains, "although human nature is not attributable to God's nature, nevertheless human nature is attributable to the Person of the only-begotten Son of God by grace, and a grace so great that there is none greater; more than that, none even equal. . . . For the Word was God, the Only-Begotten, co-eternal with the Begetter, but that he might be given to us as mediator, through ineffable grace 'the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.'" [Augustine, *Tractate* 82 on John 15:8-10, 4(3)].

and abide in his commandment of love, and bear the fruit of good works. Augustine comes to this conclusion by his figurative interpretation and hermeneutics of love.

Augustine integrates his figurative interpretation of John 15:1-12 with his hermeneutic of love through his teaching on Christ the mediator. His interpretation of the vine and the branches in his *Tractates* 80-83 shows the interrelationship of his figurative interpretation with his hermeneutics of love and his invitation to abide in Christ the mediator. His interpretation of the vine and the branches is constructed by a figurative interpretation, rests and reaches its peak in love and grace, and is centered in the role of Christ as the mediator.

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