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Reading with Ancient Christians

Tera Harmon

It's no secret that we in Churches of Christ have not placed much value on the study of Christian history for the life of the church. We rarely focus Sunday school classes, small groups, or sermons on Christian history and we do not generally appeal to Christians past as a source of wisdom for biblical interpretation or Christian living. The neglect of history is understandable, given the limited amount of time most congregations have for Christian education. The time constraints combined with our view of the prominence of Scripture can make using that valuable time on something other than Scripture a tough sell. I would like to suggest, though, that spending time in exploring Christian history could have important benefits both for our understanding of Scripture and for our development as Christians.

A strong emphasis on the importance of Scripture is among the most characteristic features of Churches of Christ. When congregations within Churches of Christ develop statements of belief, there is invariably a statement about the centrality of the Bible, affirming its position by calling it God's Word, authoritative, or inspired. In Churches of Christ, we have a strong tradition of biblical education for both children and adults, emphasizing the ongoing importance of Bible study. And yet, despite the universal emphasis we place on the importance of Scripture, there is much less general agreement on how to go about reading it.

Although revisiting our understanding of the nature and function of Scripture is a sizeable and multifaceted task, patristic thought—particularly on Scripture and interpretation—can be one tool for considering and clarifying how we use the Bible. At first look, it may seem that Christians from previous times may not have much to contribute to a present debate because their concerns are so different from ours. It is true that the controversies that occupied Christians of prior centuries are different in many ways from contemporary ones: I have yet to sit in a Sunday school class working out precise language to describe the nature of the Trinity. Likewise, a study of patristic authors is unlikely to turn up fodder for a debate on outreach strategies or worship styles. The controversies of Christians past aren't our controversies, and yet I propose that they can still be a source of wisdom for Christians today.

If patristic authors were not approaching Scripture with the same questions contemporary churches are asking of the text, then what might be the benefit in turning to them for wisdom? Why spend valuable time, particularly the very limited time ministers have with congregations, in such an indirect pursuit? Many possible benefits exist for delving into ancient Christian authors, including finding wisdom and encouragement or learning about the development of Christian thought. One particular benefit to consider is in using patristic authors to consider questions about Scripture that we may never have entertained. Patristic authors held deep reverence for Scripture and knew it well, but they often understood it in different ways than contemporary readers typically do. For example, Augustine and Gregory of Nyssa, two prominent patristic authors, wrote about the limitations and the end goals of studying Scripture. Churches of Christ excel at delving broadly and deeply into Scripture, but I suspect that conversations about the limitations of Scripture and the purpose for studying it are somewhat rarer. I suggest that this is an area for which engagement with patristic authors can be fruitful for enhancing our own understanding of the nature and function of Scripture.

Augustine and Gregory of Nyssa on Language

Perhaps the most famous patristic author, Augustine of Hippo was born in 354 to a Christian mother and a pagan father. He did not adopt Christianity for himself until the age of thirty-four, after a rather reckless youth followed by nine years with the Manicheans, a strict dualistic religious sect. After becoming a Christian, he eventually became the bishop of Hippo, a region in North Africa (modern-day Algeria). Hippo was in the Latin-speaking western part of the Roman Empire, and the end of the fourth century was a time when Christianity was legalized and spreading while the political situation was becoming increasingly unstable. Shortly after becoming bishop of Hippo, Augustine wrote most of *On Christian Doctrine*, a treatise giving instructions about how to study Scripture.¹

For Augustine, the study of Scripture begins with the study of language, particularly with the assertion that words are signs.² He defines a *sign* as “a thing which of itself makes some other thing come to mind, besides the impression that it presents to the senses.”³ He gives as examples a footprint as a sign that an animal has been present, smoke as a sign of fire, a trumpet as a sign to soldiers to advance or retreat in battle. As contemporary examples, we might add a phone ringing as a sign someone wants to talk to you or a restroom symbol to direct you to the appropriate restroom. Augustine then divides the signs into two types, natural and given. Natural signs are signs for which there is no intention to communicate: the footprint and the smoke, for example, do not intend to send a message. Given signs, then, are those that are intended to communicate a message. The trumpet, the phone, and the restroom symbol are all given signs because a sender used them to try to communicate a message. Words fall under the category of given signs.

Augustine goes on to explain in book 2 of *On Christian Teaching* that there are three parts to a communication: the object, the sign, and the subject. The thing to be communicated (the object) must be encoded into a message (the sign) and then passed along to the person receiving the communication (the subject). In the above examples, the message for the soldiers to advance in battle is encoded into a trumpet blast that is heard by soldiers who understand that means to advance. The desire of one person to speak with another (the object) is put into the form of a ringing phone (the sign), which the other person (the subject) hears and understands. In written language, there is an author, the words themselves, and the person reading the words.

Because there are three parts to communication, there is always something standing between the intended message and the one receiving the message. A sign must always stand between the subject and the object and this opens up the possibilities for miscommunication. Things can go wrong between the intended communication and received message. The trumpet player responsible for signaling the soldiers to battle may play incorrectly, indicating for the soldiers to retreat rather than advance. Or perhaps the soldiers are mercenaries and unfamiliar with the signals. A person could inadvertently call a friend on the phone, signaling a desire to talk that really doesn't exist, or the receiver of a phone call could mistake the ring of their phone for a different noise or fail to hear the ring altogether. The possibilities for mistakes between the three parts of the communication are numerous.

Augustine calls these *communicative gaps* and identifies several possibilities—such as the gap between what one intends to express and what one actually expresses, which could, for various reasons, be different. He also mentions the gap between the author's intentional meaning and the meaning the interpreter understands, indicating that the interpreter might misunderstand the meaning of a sign. There could also be gaps in common understanding: there is much about the social world that one must understand in order to give and receive meaningful signs. Finally, Augustine mentions gaps in translation. When moving from one language to another, there is always the possibility for mistranslation.

1. For biographical information on Augustine, a good place to start is Augustine's own *Confessions*. Secondary sources for Augustine are numerous. Peter Brown's biography is a classic. Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

2. I am indebted to Tarmo Toom for his presentation of Augustine's semiotics. See also R. A. Markus, *Signs and Meanings: World and Text in Ancient Christianity* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1996).

3. *On Christian Doctrine* 2.1

Why does all of this matter? For Augustine, the mechanics of linguistic communication are important because Scripture is written in language. Scripture, then, as Augustine understands it, is a sign. It carries a message, but because the message must travel through words, there are communication gaps and the potential that the message might not reach its audience untarnished. Communicative gaps are one explanation for why different people can read a passage of Scripture and understand it to mean different things. Augustine sees this matter as further complicated when it comes to Scripture because there are, in a sense, two authors for any given passage of Scripture: the Holy Spirit and the human author. This creates a deputy problem in which God's will is mediated through a human author in human language, thus rendering the message less directly than if humans had direct access to the thoughts of God. In interpreting Scripture, then, there are three meanings: the meaning of the Holy Spirit, the meaning of the human author, and the meaning understood by the reader. These three may or may not completely overlap.

Like Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa discussed the implications of having Scripture that is written in human language.⁴ Gregory was an older contemporary of Augustine, having been born sometime around 335 to a family deeply involved in Christianity. Gregory served as bishop of Nyssa, a town in Cappadocia, a region in the Greek-speaking eastern part of the Roman Empire (modern-day Turkey). Gregory understands the world as divided between what is uncreated (the Trinity) and what is created (everything else). For God, there are no spaces or intervals between, for example, intention and the actions or thoughts of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. All communication is immediate and unmediated. Everything that is created, however, has intervals or gaps. Humans experience space between what they intend and what they do, between thoughts in the mind and actions of the body, between observation and understanding.

Not being God, communication between people must be mediated through language. Because humans cannot connect mind to mind in an unmediated way, words are necessary as a vehicle for knowledge, but they do not convey messages perfectly. In order for simple reporting of an event, for example, a person observes the event, perceives what has happened, puts understanding into words, and then speaks the words, which must be heard and understood by another party. Between each of these steps lies the possibility for error, making communication something like an elaborate game of telephone. All language, even Scripture and other language about God, occurs on the created side of the uncreated/created divide and is therefore required to move through these gaps of knowledge and language.

Although helpful and necessary, language is limited and in approaching Scripture interpretation, it is important to acknowledge the limited nature of language. One way Gregory does this is by using many images and cautioning people against holding too tightly to the conception of God that is in their head. Worshipping one's own mental picture of God can steer one dangerously close to idolatry. Another way Gregory does this is by emphasizing the importance of silence in theological discourse, acknowledging the aspects of God that cannot be talked about by refraining from speech. For Gregory, there are times when the most appropriate response is wordless worship. When the capabilities of language are surpassed, the appropriate response is to marvel at God in silence.

Perhaps on a more practical level, Gregory mitigates the language problem by looking for more than one meaning when reading Scripture. The literal meaning exists, but Gregory also searches for other meanings, looking for the meaning that is the most helpful. Language being limited, Christians must maintain a sense of mystery about God and humility about the human ability to grasp the divine.

Augustine and Gregory on the Purpose of Scripture Interpretation

In addition to discussing the nature of language and its effects on Scripture interpretation, both Augustine and Gregory understand that there is an end goal to exegesis and one can measure the validity of an interpretation by its ability to produce desired results. For Augustine, the purpose of reading Scripture is to produce further love of God and neighbor:

4. Gregory's discussions of language are throughout his corpus. Perhaps the most extended discussion of it in one place is in book 2 of his *Against Eunomius*. A good secondary treatment of Gregory on language is Scot Douglass's *Theology of the Gap: Cappadocian Language Theory and the Trinitarian Controversy* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005).

So 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. Anyone who derives from them an idea which is useful for supporting this love but fails to say what the writer demonstrably meant in the passage has not made a fatal error, and is certainly not a liar.⁵

Two parts of this stand out. First, any valid interpretation of a passage of Scripture leads one to further love of God and neighbor. If an interpretation does not do this, it is not a correct understanding of Scripture. Second, if someone misunderstands a part of Scripture or interprets it incorrectly, but in a way that does lead to further love, then that person has not made a serious mistake. Augustine puts love as the lens through which all Scripture should be read to the extent that the correctness of an interpretation can be determined by whether or not it prompts a person to act with more love.

Gregory of Nyssa has a similar view that Scripture interpretation is geared toward a purpose. For Gregory, the goal of studying Scripture is to advance in virtue. Because he believes that all of Scripture is profitable and inspired, he thinks that a good interpretation should lead to more virtue. For Gregory, this is the justification for using multiple senses of Scripture: since there are instances in which the literal or obvious sense of Scripture does not seem to be able to lead to increased virtue, there must be additional meanings other than the plain literal one.⁶ For example, Gregory (along with other patristic authors) did not find motivation for increased virtue in the straightforward sexual meaning of the Song of Songs and therefore looked to other senses of Scripture, finding an allegorical reading depicting the intimacy shared between the soul and God more meaningful.

Both Augustine and Gregory of Nyssa used behavioral or spiritual results in the lives of those reading Scripture to test the validity of their interpretations. While many contemporary Christians might agree that studying Scripture ought to lead to increased love or virtue, to suggest in a contemporary context that an interpretation is correct or incorrect based on the kind of results it produces in the lives of Christians would be unusual.

The Benefits of Engaging Christian History

Why does it matter to us what Augustine or Gregory thought, especially in a tradition that does not lend any particular authority to writings outside of Scripture? I see one benefit in using these authors as a springboard to examine our own beliefs. Recently, in a four-week Sunday school series in a Church of Christ, I examined with the class an extended version of the above material. We used the material not as ideas to adopt uncritically, but as a conversation starter. We were able to discuss to what extent we agreed or disagreed with Augustine and Gregory in their assessment of the linguistic limitations of Scripture. We discussed the ways in which we perceived communication gaps between biblical texts and our own understandings. We examined the idea of multiple meanings of Scripture, wrestling with limits of valid interpretation. We considered whether we thought the validity of an interpretation could be measured by its outcomes and, if so, what might those outcomes be? We asked questions about how Scripture interpretation and Christian living intersected and what features should be present in a good interpretation of Scripture. The conversation was rich and allowed us to think about and discuss Scripture interpretation in different ways than if we had not engaged these theologians. My hope is that this type of engagement helped to back out of the issue-based scriptural disagreements we tend to have by examining more fundamental concepts about the nature and function of Scripture.

The benefits of engaging with Christian history in church are substantial in scope and depth. In addition to hearing new ideas, learning what Christianity looked like out of our own time and culture can help us consider the ways our own context shapes our view of Christianity, which can in turn help us to see ourselves on a spectrum rather than as the default mode for Christianity. Ideally, developing this kind of view can help us grow in appreciation for other expressions of Christianity, both past and present. Further, exposing

5. *On Christian Teaching* 1.86

6. See, for example, Gregory's preface to *Homilies on the Song of Songs*.

ourselves to the thoughts and lives of Christians in other contexts has the potential to make us less certain about the correctness and superiority of our own beliefs and practices, nudging us away from arrogance and toward humility.

In Churches of Christ there may be hurdles to a study of Christian history as a source of wisdom. In saying we are a “Restoration Movement,” there is an implicit judgment in how Christianity developed: somewhere along the way Christianity became so tarnished as to require restoring. Whether intentional or unintentional, the result of focusing on the beginning of Christianity has led to a neglect of its subsequent development. My hope, though, is that a renewed effort to look into the history of Christianity can broaden our understanding, underscoring both similarities and differences between our predecessors and ourselves, and also spark deeper questions and further self-reflection. At its best, history is an exercise in empathy, a practice of looking through someone else’s eyes and making a serious attempt to understand why they thought or believed as they did. Practice in empathy can only help us in learning to love our neighbor.

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