

ON CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

Saint Augustine

In Four Books

Translated by
Rev. Professor J. F. Shaw, of Londonderry.

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INTRODUCTORY NOTE BY THE EDITOR

The four books of St. Augustine *On Christian Doctrine* (*De Doctrina Christiana, iv libri*) are a compend of exegetical theology to guide the reader in the understanding and interpretation of the Sacred Scriptures, according to the analogy of faith. The first three books were written a.d. 397; the fourth was added 426.

He speaks of it in his *Retractations*, Bk. *ii.*, chap. 4, as follows:

“Finding that the books on Christian Doctrine were not finished, I thought it better to complete them before passing on to the revision of others. Accordingly, I completed the third book, which had been written as far as the place where a quotation is made from the Gospel about the woman who took leaven and hid it

in three measures of meal till the whole was leavened.¹ I added also the last book, and finished the whole work in four books [in the year 426]: the first three affording aids to the interpretation of Scripture, the last giving directions as to the mode of making known our interpretation. In the second book,² I made a mistake as to the authorship of the book commonly called the Wisdom of Solomon. For I have since learnt that it is not a well-established fact, as I said it was, that Jesus the son of Sirach, who wrote the book of Ecclesiasticus, wrote this book also: on the contrary, I have ascertained that it is altogether more probable that he was not the author of this book. Again, when I said, ‘The authority of the Old Testament is contained within the limits of these forty-four books,’³ I used the phrase ‘Old Testament’ in accordance with ecclesiastical usage. But the apostle seems to restrict the application of the name ‘Old Testament’ to the law which was given on Mount Sinai.⁴ And in what I said as to St. Ambrose having, by his knowledge of chronology, solved a great difficulty, when he showed that Plato and Jeremiah

1 Bk. iii. chap. 25.

2 Chap. 8.

3 Bk. ii. chap. 8.

4 Gal. 4.24.

were contemporaries,⁵ my memory betrayed me. What that great bishop really did say upon this subject may be seen in the book which he wrote, ‘On Sacraments or Philosophy.’”⁶

5 Book. ii. chap. 28.

6 This book is among the lost works of Ambrose.

PREFACE

Showing that to teach rules for the interpretation of Scripture is not a superfluous task.

1. There are certain rules for the interpretation of Scripture which I think might with great advantage be taught to earnest students of the word, that they may profit not only from reading the works of others who have laid open the secrets of the sacred writings, but also from themselves opening such secrets to others. These rules I propose to teach to those who are able and willing to learn, if God our Lord do not withhold from me, while I write, the thoughts He is wont to vouchsafe to me in my meditations on this subject. But before I enter upon this undertaking, I think it well to meet the objections of those who are likely to take exception to the work, or who would do so, did I not conciliate

them beforehand. And if, after all, men should still be found to make objections, yet at least they will not prevail with others (over whom they might have influence, did they not find them forearmed against their assaults), to turn them back from a useful study to the dull sloth of ignorance.

2. There are some, then, likely to object to this work of mine, because they have failed to understand the rules here laid down. Others, again, will think that I have spent my labor to no purpose, because, though they understand the rules, yet in their attempts to apply them and to interpret Scripture by them, they have failed to clear up the point they wish cleared up; and these, because they have received no assistance from this work themselves, will give it as their opinion that it can be of no use to anybody. There is a third class of objectors who either really do understand Scripture well, or think they do, and who, because they know (or imagine) that they have attained a certain power of interpreting the sacred books without reading any directions of the kind that I propose to lay down here, will cry out that such rules are not necessary for any one, but that everything rightly done towards clearing

up the obscurities of Scripture could be better done by the unassisted grace of God.

3. To reply briefly to all these. To those who do not understand what is here set down, my answer is, that I am not to be blamed for their want of understanding. It is just as if they were anxious to see the new or the old moon, or some very obscure star, and I should point it out with my finger: if they had not sight enough to see even my finger, they would surely have no right to fly into a passion with me on that account. As for those who, even though they know and understand my directions, fail to penetrate the meaning of obscure passages in Scripture, they may stand for those who, in the case I have imagined, are just able to see my finger, but cannot see the stars at which it is pointed. And so both these classes had better give up blaming me, and pray instead that God would grant them the sight of their eyes. For though I can move my finger to point out an object, it is out of my power to open men's eyes that they may see either the fact that I am pointing, or the object at which I point.

4. But now as to those who talk vauntingly of Divine Grace, and boast that they understand and can explain

Scripture without the aid of such directions as those I now propose to lay down, and who think, therefore, that what I have undertaken to write is entirely superfluous. I would such persons could calm themselves so far as to remember that, however justly they may rejoice in God's great gift, yet it was from human teachers they themselves learnt to read. Now, they would hardly think it right that they should for that reason be held in contempt by the Egyptian monk Antony, a just and holy man, who, not being able to read himself, is said to have committed the Scriptures to memory through hearing them read by others, and by dint of wise meditation to have arrived at a thorough understanding of them; or by that barbarian slave Christianus, of whom I have lately heard from very respectable and trustworthy witnesses, who, without any teaching from man, attained a full knowledge of the art of reading simply through prayer that it might be revealed to him; after three days' supplication obtaining his request that he might read through a book presented to him on the spot by the astonished bystanders.

5. But if any one thinks that these stories are false, I do not strongly insist on them. For, as I am dealing with Christians who profess to understand the Scriptures

without any directions from man (and if the fact be so, they boast of a real advantage, and one of no ordinary kind), they must surely grant that every one of us learnt his own language by hearing it constantly from childhood, and that any other language we have learnt,—Greek, or Hebrew, or any of the rest,—we have learnt either in the same way, by hearing it spoken, or from a human teacher. Now, then, suppose we advise all our brethren not to teach their children any of these things, because on the outpouring of the Holy Spirit the apostles immediately began to speak the language of every race; and warn every one who has not had a like experience that he need not consider himself a Christian, or may at least doubt whether he has yet received the Holy Spirit? No, no; rather let us put away false pride and learn whatever can be learnt from man; and let him who teaches another communicate what he has himself received without arrogance and without jealousy. And do not let us tempt Him in whom we have believed, lest, being ensnared by such wiles of the enemy and by our own perversity, we may even refuse to go to the churches to hear the gospel itself, or to read a book, or to listen to another reading or preaching, in the hope that we shall be carried up to the third heaven, “whether in the body or out of the body,” as the apostle

says,⁷ and there hear unspeakable words, such as it is not lawful for man to utter, or see the Lord Jesus Christ and hear the gospel from His own lips rather than from those of men.

6. Let us beware of such dangerous temptations of pride, and let us rather consider the fact that the Apostle Paul himself, although stricken down and admonished by the voice of God from heaven, was yet sent to a man to receive the sacraments and be admitted into the Church;⁸ and that Cornelius the centurion, although an angel announced to him that his prayers were heard and his alms had in remembrance, was yet handed over to Peter for instruction, and not only received the sacraments from the apostle's hands, but was also instructed by him as to the proper objects of faith, hope, and love.⁹ And without doubt it was *possible* to have done everything through the instrumentality of angels, but the condition of our race would have been much more degraded if God had not chosen to make use of men as the ministers of His word to their fellow-men. For how could that be true which is

7 2 Cor. 12.2-4.

8 Acts 9.3.

9 Acts 10.

written, “The temple of God is holy, which temple ye are,”¹⁰ if God gave forth no oracles from His human temple, but communicated everything that He wished to be taught to men by voices from heaven, or through the ministration of angels? Moreover, love itself, which binds men together in the bond of unity, would have no means of pouring soul into soul, and, as it were, mingling them one with another, if men never learnt anything from their fellow-men.

7. And we know that the eunuch who was reading Isaiah the prophet, and did not understand what he read, was not sent by the apostle to an angel, nor was it an angel who explained to him what he did not understand, nor was he inwardly illuminated by the grace of God without the interposition of man; on the contrary, at the suggestion of God, Philip, who *did* understand the prophet, came to him, and sat with him, and in human words, and with a human tongue, opened to him the Scriptures.¹¹ Did not God talk with Moses, and yet he, with great wisdom and entire absence of jealous pride, accepted the plan of his father-in-law, a man of an alien race, for ruling and administering the

10 1 Cor. 3.17.

11 Acts 8.26.

affairs of the great nation entrusted to him?¹² For Moses knew that a wise plan, in whatever mind it might originate, was to be ascribed not to the man who devised it, but to Him who is the Truth, the unchangeable God.

8. In the last place, every one who boasts that he, through divine illumination, understands the obscurities of Scripture, though not instructed in any rules of interpretation, at the same time believes, and rightly believes, that this power is not his own, in the sense of originating with himself, but is the gift of God. For so he seeks God's glory, not his own. But reading and understanding, as he does, without the aid of any human interpreter, why does he himself undertake to interpret for others? Why does he not rather send them direct to God, that they too may learn by the inward teaching of the Spirit without the help of man? The truth is, he fears to incur the reproach: "Thou wicked and slothful servant, thou oughtest to have put my money to the exchangers."¹³ Seeing, then, that these men teach others, either through speech or writing, what they understand, surely they cannot blame me if I likewise teach not only what they understand, but

12 Ex. 18.13.

13 Matt. 25:26, 27.

also the rules of interpretation they follow. For no one ought to consider anything as his own, except perhaps what is false. All truth is of Him who says, "I am the truth."¹⁴ For what have we that we did not receive? and if we have received it, why do we glory, as if we had not received it?¹⁵

9. He who reads to an audience pronounces aloud the words he sees before him: he who teaches reading, does it that others may be able to read for themselves. Each, however, communicates to others what he has learnt himself. Just so, the man who explains to an audience the passages of Scripture he understands is like one who reads aloud the words before him. On the other hand, the man who lays down rules for interpretation is like one who teaches reading, that is, shows others how to read for themselves. So that, just as he who knows how to read is not dependent on some one else, when he finds a book, to tell him what is written in it, so the man who is in possession of the rules which I here attempt to lay down, if he meet with an obscure passage in the books which he reads, will not need an interpreter to lay open the secret to him, but, holding

14 John 14.6.

15 1 Cor. 4.7.

fast by certain rules, and following up certain indications, will arrive at the hidden sense without any error, or at least without falling into any gross absurdity. And so although it will sufficiently appear in the course of the work itself that no one can justly object to this undertaking of mine, which has no other object than to be of service, yet as it seemed convenient to reply at the outset to any who might make preliminary objections, such is the start I have thought good to make on the road I am about to traverse in this book.

BOOK I

*A*rgument—The author divides his work into two parts, one relating to the discovery, the other to the expression, of the true sense of scripture. He shows that to discover the meaning we must attend both to things and to signs, as it is necessary to know what things we ought to teach to the Christian people, and also the signs of these things, that is, where the knowledge of these things is to be sought. In this first book he treats of things, which he divides into three classes,—things to be enjoyed, things to be used, and things which use and enjoy. The only object which ought to be enjoyed is the triune God, who is our highest good and our true happiness. We are prevented by our sins from enjoying God; and that our sins might be taken away, “the word was made flesh,” our Lord suffered, and died, and rose again, and ascended into heaven, taking to himself as his bride the church, in which we receive remission of our sins. And if our sins are remitted and

our souls renewed by grace, we may await with hope the resurrection of the body to eternal glory; if not, we shall be raised to everlasting punishment. These matters relating to faith having been expounded, the author goes on to show that all objects, except God, are for use; for, though some of them may be loved, yet our love is not to rest in them, but to have reference to God. And we ourselves are not objects of enjoyment to God; he uses us, but for our own advantage. He then goes on to show that love—the love of God for his own sake and the love of our neighbor for God's sake—is the fulfillment and the end of all Scripture. After adding a few words about hope, he shows, in conclusion, that faith, hope, and love are graces essentially necessary for him who would understand and explain aright the Holy Scriptures.

CHAPTER I

The Interpretation of Scripture Depends on the Discovery and Enunciation of the Meaning, and is to Be Undertaken in Dependence on God's Aid.

1. There are two things on which all interpretation of Scripture depends: the mode of ascertaining the proper meaning, and the mode of making known the meaning when it is ascertained. We shall treat first of the mode of ascertaining, next of the mode of making known, the meaning;—a great and arduous undertaking, and one that, if difficult to carry out, it is, I fear, presumptuous to enter upon. And presumptuous it would undoubtedly be, if I were counting on my own strength; but since my hope of accomplishing the work rests on Him who has already supplied me with many thoughts on this subject, I do not fear but that He will go on to supply what is yet wanting when once I have begun to use what He has already given. For a possession which is not diminished by being shared with others, if it is possessed and not shared, is not yet possessed as it ought to

be possessed. The Lord saith “Whosoever hath, to him shall be given.”¹⁶ He will give, then, to those who have; that is to say, if they use freely and cheerfully what they have received, He will add to and perfect His gifts. The loaves in the miracle were only five and seven in number before the disciples began to divide them among the hungry people. But when once they began to distribute them, though the wants of so many thousands were satisfied, they filled baskets with the fragments that were left.¹⁷ Now, just as that bread increased in the very act of breaking it, so those thoughts which the Lord has already vouchsafed to me with a view to undertaking this work will, as soon as I begin to impart them to others, be multiplied by His grace, so that, in this very work of distribution in which I have engaged, so far from incurring loss and poverty, I shall be made to rejoice in a marvellous increase of wealth.

16 Matt. 13.12.

17 Matt. 14:17, Matt. 20:34, etc.