

# **On Christian Doctrine Study Guide**

## **On Christian Doctrine by Augustine of Hippo**

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# Plot Summary

De Doctrina Christiana was written by the great philosopher, theologian and Bishop of Milan, Augustine of Hippo, around the beginning of the fifth century A.D. He wrote it for a variety of reasons, but three predominate: (i) he wanted to convince those who thought they could simply divine the meaning of Scripture to study and pay heed to interpretation, (ii) he wanted to teach principles of Scriptural interpretation and encourage the study of subjects that aid Scriptural interpretation, and (iii) he wanted to teach Christian speakers about the skills and practices of a good Christian orator. The writing of De Doctrina Christiana was halted when Augustine became Bishop of Milan, but he later resumed it, so the book has a certain divide in its structure, one, however, that is a bit hard to notice. The book was left unfinished.

De Doctrina Christiana contains a preface and four books. In the preface, Augustine responds to what he anticipates will be three types of critics of his work; the most important is the third type of critic— one who believes he does not need to study Scriptural interpretation to understand Scripture. Augustine seeks to convince this type of critic to take Augustine's writings seriously. In Book One, Augustine sets out the nature of his aims. He divides entities in reality into things and signs and says that Scripture contains both. Distinguishing between these two ideas is crucial. Further, he argues that signs come in a variety of ways - some literal, some figurative, some ambiguous, some unrecognized. He then proceeds to argue that to interpret Scripture one must possess the theological virtues of faith, hope and love and understand that the message of Scripture is what he calls "the law of love" or the Christian principle of loving God and one's neighbor.

Book One also addresses the nature of things. In Book Two, Augustine focuses on the meaning of signs as signs and develops a conceptual framework for analyzing signs in detail. He is most concerned to help the reader analyze unknown signs. Words are signs in the capacity of signs in that they are only used as signs. And to understand the words of Scripture, the student of Scripture must know many different fields of study, including philosophy, history and many languages. In Book Three, Augustine handles the difficult topic of ambiguous signs, deepening the distinction between figurative and literal passages, teaching his reader how to distinguish them and how to divine the meaning of ambiguous passages. He then provides a detailed account of how to understand what a figurative expression means and discusses the exegetical rules Tyconius, an earlier exegete and a Donatist, laid down for Scriptural interpretation.

Finally, in Book Four, Augustine turns to teaching Christian speakers how to communicate rightly-interpreted Scripture. The Christian must use rhetoric and oratory, which can be used for good as well as evil. He must become a master of eloquence if he is able and use his abilities to teach the truth to the laity. Further, he must be a man of upright behavior so as not to undermine his speech.

# Preface

## Preface Summary and Analysis

Augustine begins *De Doctrina Christiana* by predicting that he will face three kinds of criticism—criticism from those who cannot grasp his teaching, those who refuse or are unable to apply it, and those who believe it is not needed. Most of Augustine's efforts in the preface are aimed at refuting the last group. He invites them to remember experiencing learning for themselves and further, Augustine argues, there are many Scriptural examples where humans taught other humans.

Focusing on Augustine's critique of the third type of critic, Augustine mentions that these critics will either understand Scripture or believe they do. Since they believe they already understand, they see no need to learn to interpret the Scriptures with the aid of rules of the sort Augustine wants to convey. Instead, they defend the doctrine that God will simply communicate the meaning of Scripture through a "special gift." Augustine believes these critics miss the fact that they learned the alphabet through human help; God used a human means to carry out his illumination. If God in fact gives such a gift to someone, he is indeed blessed, but is highly atypical.

Augustine also warns that the devil can mislead one into thinking one knows more than one does, so attention to rules is important. Further, in Scripture, God uses angels to teach men what to do, but often in Scripture, angels direct men to human communities to learn. Refusing to learn from a community also eliminates an opportunity for mutual love. Finally, if these men claim to understand the Bible through divine gift, why do they teach others? Why not simply refer these others to God directly? He could not be partial in his teaching in this way.



# Book One

## Book One Summary and Analysis

After refuting his potential critics, Augustine starts the main body of the book and prefigures the next four books by dividing his subject matter in two - (i) understanding what one should learn from Scripture and (ii) understanding how to convey what one has learned. To learn what Scripture teaches, the student of Scripture must understand both "things" and "signs," a distinction that will be worked out throughout the first three books. Book I focuses on "things qua things." This means he will focus on things as things, since things can function as signs and vice versa.

Augustine argues that humans are things that can also "enjoy," love and "use" things. God should be enjoyed, but to enjoy Him, one's eyes must be "purged" and the individual should follow God's plan and healing. The book will focus on extrapolating an understand of God's love for exegetical purposes. Augustine wants to answer many questions about the Christian conception of love since the idea of love lies at the root of the primary two commandments of Christianity - to love God and to love one's neighbor. Interpretations of Scripture should increase the love that one feels, so a conception of love is integral to proper Scriptural interpretation.

Augustine begins Book One by distinguishing between discovering what Scripture teaches and communicating it. He argues that God will aid him in this process, giving him knowledge that he lacks. God will give to Augustine because He always gives to those who "give away," or teach as in Augustine's case. He next distinguishes between teaching through things and signs, but things are learned about via signs. Things are objects like "logs, stones, sheep and so on, which are not employed to signify something." However, Augustine excludes a log in Scripture that Moses used to remove the bitter taste from some waters because in that case the log was a symbol. Some signifiers serve merely as signifiers, like words, which are only used to signify; therefore, signs are always things. But everything is not a sign.

Next Augustine separates those things that are enjoyed and those that are used. Some things can be both enjoyed and used. Augustine's distinction is akin to the distinction between instrumental and intrinsic goods. One may value a good meal simply because it is delicious; in this sense, the meal is to be "enjoyed." And one may use a pot and pan to cook the meal; these things are to be "used" in order to "enjoy." However, one might also enjoy a thing to be used, such as enjoying the sturdiness and shininess of a new frying pan. Enjoying something consists in loving it for its own sake. The ultimate thing to be enjoyed is the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the Trinity of Christianity. All other things are used as means to enjoy God as Trinity. Augustine then backs off this claim, noting that in some sense to speak of God is to speak of the unspeakable. Nothing said of God is worthy of Him, but nonetheless he "sanctions" the use of human descriptions and voices.



And He is even thought of by those who believe themselves to be worshipping other gods, since these people are reaching to name a being beyond their comprehension and that is inspired by ideas God gave them. Thus, if they worship the sun, they truly worship the most powerful source of all light, a description which most truly picks out God. Further, many are wise, and see that wisdom is unchanging and that Truth is therefore unchanging and thus know an unchanging standard, which is in fact God. Augustine then suggests that God gives the ability of all minds to know the truth but that grasping this truth is a process. Here Augustine introduces his doctrine of an "inner eye" which can see eternal truths even when tainted by sin because it is illuminated by God.

Augustine begins an explanation of his conception of love. He invites his reader to consider the confidence that God inspires in His children through His death, resurrection and promise of return. One cannot even imagine the joys God will bring. Because God loves us, died for us and wants to bring us down the path towards unity with Him, He would not arbitrarily block our path towards Him with obstacles of His own devising. The body and spirit will also be changed by God, the body at the resurrection of all humans, and the spirit through the process of sanctification. The soul and the body will last eternally. Augustine concludes that only "eternal and unchangeable things" mentioned are those that can be enjoyed.

All other things should be used to achieve enjoyment. The doctrines and beings Augustine described are those that are intrinsically good. And since God gave man a rational soul, He should enjoy it as well and use it. In a certain sense, however, a man shouldn't enjoy himself but only love himself because of God. He should always strive for the unchangeable. One should only love oneself on account of God; to love oneself for other reasons leads to destruction, since God should be loved by all your heart, mind and soul; this leaves no room for any other thing to be loved not on account of God. Those things to be used are not all supposed to be loved. Four things should be loved: (i) Love above us, (ii) Our natures, (iii) Those things near to us, and (iv) Those beneath us. Love is incompatible with coveting things for oneself because everything really belongs to God; the body in particular should not be loved.

In a certain sense, no one hates themselves. And no one hates his body. Even those who seem to hate the body, only hate the particulars of their bodies, not having a body per se. The spirit must subdue the flesh, thus love of the flesh cannot get in the way of the spirit. Humans must be taught how to love as well. And those who know how to teach are those who live justly and in a holy fashion. Next, all should be loved equally, but since one cannot help all men, one should settle for helping those nearby. We should also love our enemies. All are owed compassion. We must use men sometimes but only for good, not for our own gain; for that is how God uses us. And we should enjoy each other within ourselves. Further, when we enjoy each other, we enjoy God in the other rather than the human alone.

Augustine wraps up his description of the nature of love in order to help his reader understand the central idea of the law of love and that the message of Christianity is that one should love God - the thing to be enjoyed - and love the neighbor - those who can do the enjoying. No one can understand the Scriptures without understanding this



fact. Those with a different interpretation are lying or confused. Sometimes, however, an interpreter will accidentally postulate a doctrine incompatible with this message, but he should then check his interpretation, since it must therefore err. Furthermore, interpretations should always build up faith, hope and love. Interpretations of Scripture that do not do this must be in error as well. Those who have faith, hope and love will not need the scriptures except to teach others these virtues. Possessing and understanding these virtues will enable him to explain the scriptures to anyone.



# Book Two

## Book Two Summary and Analysis

In Book Two, Augustine analyzes signs qua signs (for signs can be things, as well). He constructs a conceptual framework for analyzing signs. On this view, words are signs, but they are hard to understand signs because the Scripture contains many languages and God provides Scriptural complexity to satisfy a hard-working mind. Signs must be divided into those that are natural, i.e., ones that are signs regardless of whether they want to be, and given signs, which are used only to express and transmit thoughts. The latter category of signs is what Augustine will discuss. He also covers how these signs are communicated to the various senses (mostly through the ears).

One's interpretation can run astray when he misses a sign or finds an ambiguous sign; signs can be literal or metaphorical. Further, signs can be ambiguous by containing either misunderstood words or expressions - one must commit these words and expressions to memory. And Augustine wonders why God would bother with such confusing signs when he could communicate without them; he suggests that this is because we find grasping the nature of things by analogy more salient and satisfying.

As a result, a student of Scripture must have (a) the Christian virtues faith, hope and love and (b) must know the canon of Scripture well. He must grasp his own depravity, understanding that he loves temporal things too much. He can come to understand Scripture only by passing through stages of spiritual purification and understanding, coming to grasp his need for God and the need for the Christian virtues. He has to learn the relevant languages or he must rely heavily on experts; he must use original versions of the text and make use of all the translations he can find; sometimes those translated as literally as possible can be of great use.

One has to know about the objects, times, places and people referred to in Scripture and know enough about the conceptions of nature and the spiritual realm that the people in scripture have. Augustine divides these spheres of natural knowledge needed for Scriptural interpretation into arts and sciences. Arts and sciences can be human or divine practices that humans observe and develop. Some human practices involved superstition, like astrology, but they must not be practiced. Other practices are pointless and indicate a kind of selfishness, such as studying representational art (this study is only pointless and selfish for those learning to interpret Scripture).

Yet some arts and sciences must be learned, such as an understanding of measurements of all kinds, distances, weight, etc. One must also know alphabets, and so on. History must be studied carefully and the scriptural student must know something of medicine and astronomy (yes, astronomy sometimes leads to astrology, so one must be careful to avoid this trap). To understand the sea, one must study navigation, and for everything logic then rhetoric must be well-understood. Augustine even includes some knowledge of philosophy and emphasizes that even if non-Christian philosophers





generate certain metaphysical ideas, the Christian is perfectly entitled to make use of them for preaching the Gospel.

Augustine notes that it is absolutely crucial that as one learns about these fields, that one checks the pride that develops along with great learning. As the Scripture notes, "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up." So, one must be sure to grow love in one's heart first and foremost to check this tendency. What is most notable about Augustine's discussion in Book Two is the significance of Augustine's structuring of educational curriculum that appears to have been very influential in the development of classical education. Augustine's emphases are also a broad and eclectic mix, from rhetoric to philosophy, botany to astronomy, languages, history and logic. Also fascinating is his emphasis on understanding history and the culture and languages of the biblical peoples and in fact claiming that such knowledge is required to understand what Scripture teaches, a point about the historical and contextual nature of Scriptural interpretation that will not be heavily emphasized until the mid-19th century.

And furthermore, Augustine regards many of these disciplines as "divinely instituted." That is, because they are required to understand God's revelation, they must have been ordained by God as good social and intellectual practices. And while Augustine does not mention grammar directly, it is clear that he intends for it to be studied along with languages and poetry, both of which, obviously, are contained within Scripture. Perhaps the most important effect of Book II is to communicate with great force how much mastery of many fields of study is needed in order to properly interpret Scripture. Because Augustine notes so many fields, one can infer that he is really taking to task on those who believe they can divine the meaning of Scripture without careful study.

# Book Three

## Book Three Summary and Analysis

The topic of Book Two is learning how to handle those signs that are unknown or not familiar—Augustine recommends theological virtue and great learning as methods of handling these problems. But now Augustine must tackle the problem of those signs that are ambiguous. The meaning of phrases and sentences can often be completely changed simply with misplaced punctuation. And this is a problem even for the most literal passages. Figurative passages are even more difficult to interpret.

Further, Christians must be careful not to confuse sign and thing as many pagans do. Two general confusions derive from this - treating signs as things and things as signs. One can take figuratively passages meant literally, and this will often lead interpreters in different ages to read Scriptural passages according to their own cultural, historical and particular biases. The ethical principle of the Bible must guide its interpretation - the principle of love.

Augustine next provides standards by which one can delineate whether a passage should be taken figuratively or literally. First, if God or angels speak with cruel words they can only speak to destroying evil or lust. And any evil actions or speech from those whose holiness the Scripture praises must be treated merely figuratively. Any speech that condemns evil and recommends love or kindness should be taken literally and those that do the opposite can only be read figuratively.

Furthermore, commands are often meant only for certain individuals or groups, and in these cases, the commands, when they seem evil, must be understood as good for the individual or group at the time. Many actions committed in the Old Testament due to a character's understanding of his duties cannot currently be done without sinful intent. Yet, sometimes a passage should be read both figuratively and literally, since holy men really can commit great sins. This is imperative in order that individuals never think they are too great to sin. Augustine reminds the reader of the Scriptural passage: "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble."

Once the figurative and literal are separated, one must harmonize the meanings of the passages. Some seem contrary to one another; others seem simply distinct and still, and others appear to resemble one another. For instance, in the beginning of Genesis, the mention of the serpent is the mention of evil, but in the New Testament, Christians are exhorted to be as "wise as serpents." And even in the New Testament Jesus says both that "I am the bread of life" and that "man does not live by bread alone." Many words and phrases not only signify one idea but two or more; whether they signify a single idea or many will depend on the contexts in which the phrase is embedded. Sometimes when looking for the right meanings and the right number of meanings it is imperative that the interpreter look to the author's intentions.



A crucial point arises when Augustine discusses the fact that Christian authors used widely varying figures of speech and grammar types. Many cannot even imagine the diversity, as the diversity is far greater than what exists in most works of literature. Augustine also discusses these particular types of grammar called "tropes." Some of these tropes include allegory, enigma, parable, and catachresis. And sometimes speech means the opposite of what it says through both irony and antiphrasis. Often the secondary, opposing meaning is illustrated through the intonation of one's voice, such as in "You're doing a good job there." (This phrase was used even in Augustine's time.) Knowing about these tropes is so essential to reading Scripture that it cannot be interpreted without it.

Next Augustine turns to discuss the interpretation of Tyconius, a Donatist. Tyconius often opposed his fellow Donatists and wrote *The Book of Rules*, which developed seven rules that should be used to interpret Scripture. Augustine then lists them. Many of these principles are useful. Augustine even uses some of the rules to interpret Scripture. The rules are (i) On the Lord and his body, (ii) On the Lord's twofold body, (iii) On the promises and the law, (iv) On species and genus, (v) On measurements of time, (vi) recapitulation, and (vii) On the devil and his body. The remainder of Book Three analyzes these principles in detail, applying them to particular cases.

Augustine here leaves many questions unanswered, such as whether there are principles that govern that application of interpretive rules to the Scriptures and how to understand the moral rules in Scripture (say, whether they are universal or particular). It is not clear how Augustine chose to focus on the issues he focused on. Nonetheless, the effort is a beginning of a set of exegetical principles.

# Book Four

## Book Four Summary and Analysis

Book Four changes subjects. Now that Augustine has discussed how to understand and interpret Scripture, he moves to discuss how to present Scriptural interpretation to others. However, he wants to resist teaching his readers rhetoric. Of course, Christians must use rhetoric to defend the faith; rhetoric can be used for good or for ill, and if Christians do not use it they will be at a disadvantage. The best way to acquire rhetorical skill is by listening to eloquent Christians and learning to imitate them rather than studying rhetoric from books. But suppose a pastor cannot acquire the skill of eloquent speech and rhetoric. In this case, it is best for him to strictly adhere to the words of the Scripture.

The Scriptures themselves have a certain kind of eloquence, and Augustine cites several passages as evidence. But Scripture must not be quoted when it is bizarre or obscure. The purpose of giving a sermon is to make Scripture intelligible, not to confuse the laity. Instead, the pastor or speaker must sometimes make use of colloquial phrases that the ordinary person can understand, phrases that may often upset the most intelligent and informed. Augustine discusses the rhetorical principles of Cicero when he discusses the crucial task of engaging the attention and the audience.

The orator, according to Cicero, must (i) teach, (ii) delight, and (iii) move. He will also speak in proportion with the gravity of the subject matter. One must be restrained when speaking of things of little importance, grand when discussing important things, and mixed when discussing things of middling importance. Although, nothing in Scripture is trivial, so these rules must be applied in a more subtle fashion. Augustine then applies these rules by discussing various passages in Scripture and in the sermons of the church fathers, like Cyprian and Ambrose. Augustine also emphasizes that giving pleasure to the audience is the least important aim. And the speaker must also speak with "obedience" or with the authority of correct Scriptural interpretation.

Augustine wraps up Book Four by arguing that the Christian speaker, the communicator of rightly interpreted Scripture, must not only be an eloquent orator but must live a Christian life. He must have integrity, be focused on truth rather than winning arguments, and should always pray to effectively communicate. The speaker should always be eager to learn. Further, they should not preach their own opinions from the pulpit but always speak from Scripture or in relation to it.

Augustine ends by discussing those who can give speeches but not write them. Those who have speechwriters do nothing wrong, so long as they act and speak uprightly. In the final paragraph, Augustine regrets the length of the book, too long for those to whom it is relevant. Nonetheless, he thanks God that he had the opportunity to discuss these matters. It is worth noting as Book four ends that it remains the most influential part of

De Doctrina Christiana, particularly for its advice on the principles of Christian rhetoric and the degree to which it draws from Cicero.



# Characters

## Augustine

Saint Aurelius Augustine of Hippo lived from 354 - 430 A.D. He was the Bishop of Milan in North Africa and is considered a Doctor of the Roman Catholic Church. He is a well-known philosopher, Christian and Platonist. Augustine is one of the first Christian thinkers to mix Greek attention to reason and Greek philosophy with Christian doctrine. Augustine famously converted to Christianity from Manicheanism and was widely regarded even in his day for his brilliance. He became Bishop of Milan in 387 around the time he wrote *De Doctrina Christiana*. Since Augustine had become a Christian priest and was widely regarded as a theological and pastoral expert, he seeks, in this work, to lay out a philosophy of Scriptural exegesis and Christian oration in order to teach Christian pastors how to read and communicate the Christian message. It is not entirely clear what prompted Augustine to write the book, but the goal of the book is one he states clearly. Augustine broke off writing *De Doctrina Christiana* when he was first appointed Bishop of Milan but later resumed his writing. The book was left unfinished. Augustine is particularly intent in the book in building an exegetical philosophy out of what he understands as the principle idea within Christianity - the law of love. One must love God with all one's soul and must love the neighbor as oneself. While Augustine is not precisely a character in the book, he references himself. In any event, the book is a work of exegesis and philosophy, not a narrative, so the idea of a character does not neatly apply.

## The Third Type of Critic

In the preface, Augustine anticipates that his work will face three types of critics. First, there will be critics who are too stupid to understand his writings and arguments. Their criticisms will issue from ignorance and can largely be ignored. Second, there will be critics who agree with the main line of argument, but fail to apply it. Since their failure is the result of sin and sloth, they, too, may be ignored. It is the third type of critic who must be closely answered. And it is this critic who is implicitly addressed in *De Doctrina Christiana*. The third type of critic does not believe that he needs to study the principles of Scriptural interpretation or the surrounding areas of scholarship relevant to it in order to know what the Scriptures teach. Instead, he holds that by being close to God in prayer and spirit, God will simply reveal the meaning of the Scriptures to him. Scriptural exegesis simply isn't hard when you have the Holy Spirit. Augustine argues that God often teaches men through human beings and that many of the difficulties in Scripture have not been clearly resolved via this "divining" method. Further, Augustine accuses the critics of hypocrisy because they teach what Scripture says. If their method works, why not simply let laity pursue the same method? Why bother teaching them? Any reason they give on behalf of teaching the laity will apply to letting themselves be taught.



## **The Student of Scripture**

The student of Scripture is one who tries to understand Scriptural truths through all divinely-ordained means. For Augustine, the student of Scripture must understand the law of love and possess the theological virtues. He must also be committed to the study of diverse fields of knowledge.

## **The Writers of Scripture**

Augustine emphasizes how distinct the contexts and ideas of the various writers of Scripture are. He thinks it is crucial to learn the languages and histories of the Scriptural writers in order to understand their positions.

## **The Christian Orator**

The Christian orator must be an effective communicator and be able to encourage and uplift his audience with the message of the Gospel. He must also live an upright life.

## **Cicero**

The great Roman Consul who was an expert on oration. Augustine believes much can be learned from his works on rhetoric.

## **Tyconius**

A Donatist exegete predecessor to Augustine, from whom Augustine believes much can be learned. His *The Book of Rules* contains seven principles of Scriptural exegesis of which Augustine mostly approves.

## **Donatists**

The Donatists are one of Augustine's main intellectual opponents. They are Christians who believe Christian pastors who surrendered preaching the Gospel and the Scriptures under penalty of law in their areas could not bring about valid sacraments. This led to schism with Rome. Augustine believed that the Donatists were heretics.

## **Jesus Christ**

Understanding the commandments of Jesus Christ - love God and love thy neighbor - is critical to understanding the Scripture.



## God

God is the ultimate writer of Scripture whose will one must discern to interpret Scripture effectively.

## Christians

Augustine is a Christian with standard Christian beliefs. He is writing *De Doctrina Christiana* to strengthen Scriptural exegesis in the Christian church.





# Objects/Places

## Christendom

The area of the world largely controlled by Christians. Augustine is writing to pastors and exegetes across Christendom.

## Scripture

The Sixty-six books of the Bible that contains the revelation of God to be interpreted.

## Tropes

Types of grammar, such as allegories, irony and parables that must be understood in order to grasp the meaning of Scripture.

## The Pulpit

The place where Christian orators speak within a church.

## Divinely Instituted Subjects

All those subjects required to understand Scripture, including but not limited to astronomy, botany, philosophy, logic, rhetoric, grammar, and foreign languages.

## Signs

Symbols as opposed to things. Signs can be things or signs; for instance, a burning bush is a sign that is a thing; whereas, a word is a sign that functions only as a sign. The sign-thing distinction is crucial to any proper reading of Scripture.

## Things

Things as opposed to Signs. They are real entities that do not represent other things.

## Figurative Passages

Passages of Scripture not meant to be taken literally.



## **Literal Passages**

Passages of Scripture meant to be taken literally. A passage can also have both a figurative and literal meaning.

## **Theological Virtues**

The theological virtues are those virtues given to man via God's grace - faith, hope and love. If one does not possess the theological virtues at least in part, he cannot properly interpret Scripture.

## **The Law of Love**

The central message of the Scriptures - love God and love thy neighbor. This is the central exegetical principle of Scripture. Only those interpretations of Scripture which promote and deepen our understanding of the law of love are valid.

## **The Canon**

The Canon of Scripture are the sixty-six books throughout the Old and New Testaments that the Church ordained would count as the basis of Christian teaching.

## **Speeches/Sermons**

Speeches or sermons by Christians can be Christian orations which teach the Gospel to others. One must understand the Scripture and practice eloquent oration in order to give speeches and sermons effectively.

## **The Book of Rules**

The book on exegetical principles written by the Donatist scholar Tyconius.



# Themes

## Scriptural Interpretation According to the Law of Love

Augustine believes that the central message of Christianity is what he calls "the law of love," or the message of love contained in Christ's summation of the entirety of morality - "love the Lord, Your God with all your heart, with all your mind and with all your soul, and love your neighbor as yourself." Everything else in Scripture can be understood as promoting this single message. Therefore, if one does not understand the law of love then he cannot successfully interpret Scripture. The law of love is also the measure of all Scriptural interpretations. Thus, if one develops an interpretation of Scripture that contradicts the law of love, the interpretation must therefore be flawed. And even if one develops an interpretation of Scripture that fails to sufficiently uplift and focus on the law of love, then that interpretation, too, is flawed. The principle goes even deeper, in fact. For one must actually understand and partake in the law of love to some degree in order to interpret Scripture correctly. The law of love must be elevated in the greatest possible way, according to Augustine. Since it is the primary message of God to man, it must therefore be elevated and promoted as highly as we promote any divine, beautiful and eternal thing. Furthermore, because the law of love is the primary message of God to man, all Scriptural exegesis must uplift this simple principle.

## Scriptural Interpretation is Important and Requires Great St

One of Augustine's primary aims in writing *De Doctrina Christiana* is to argue against those who reject the importance of a careful interpretation of Scripture according to sound exegetical principles and the careful study of subjects related to such exegesis. In the preface of the book, Augustine addresses three types of critic he anticipates will arise in response to his book. The most important sort of critic, the "third type," is the critic who argues that he can simply divine what Scripture means through the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit. He is convinced he doesn't need to know exegetical principles in order to understand the Scriptures; instead, he can simply read, pray and understand. But Augustine believes that this kind of thinking is a profound error. Instead, he believes that one must interpret Scripture carefully according to sound principles that have been thought of in detail by one's interpretive tradition. Furthermore, one must have at least some mastery over those subjects relevant to understanding Scripture. One must know history in order to understand the historical contexts of Scripture's many writings. One must also be prepared to learn the languages in which the Scripture is written. Augustine recommends the study of astronomy, botany, and even sea navigation to understand the worldview of the characters in Scripture. And he suggests understanding grammar, rhetoric, and logic as prerequisites to grasping the true meaning of the Scripture. He even defends the appropriation and learning of philosophy, including the works of pagan philosophers like the Platonists.



## Christian Oration

The theme of the first three books of *De Doctrina Christiana* is how to interpret Scripture. But eventually the message of Scripture must be communicated to others, particularly to the laity. However, properly communicating Scriptural truths requires a whole new skill set beyond interpreting Scripture properly. Augustine first addresses the skills that one must possess in order to be an effective orator, and he follows the great Roman orator Cicero on this to some degree. First, he reiterates Cicero's point that oratory has three purposes - to teach the listener, to give pleasure to the listener and to move the listener. As a result, the orator has to speak and argue clearly; he must use beautiful prose that sounds good to the listener and must speak to the heart of the listener. He must also be capable of being a rousing orator, of calling others to action and inspiring them. Furthermore, one's style of speech must match the gravity of the subject matter. One should use a restrained style of speech when speaking of matters of little import, while one should use a grand style of speech when speaking of matters of great import. Matters of middling import should be spoken with a mixed style. Augustine, however, deepens Cicero's ideas and modifies them to be compatible with Christianity. Since Scriptural truths are always of great important, it may seem like the grand style should be used often, but this is not quite right. Further, the Christian orator must care least about giving the audience pleasure and most about proper teaching. In addition, one must speak with "obedience" or with the absolute authority of Scripture. Augustine appends to this account several character requirements on the Christian orator - he must live in an upright manner and be righteous in order to properly represent Scriptural truths.



# Style

## Perspective

The perspective of *De Doctrina Christiana* is that of St. Augustine of Hippo's. At this time in Augustine's life (around 397 AD, when Augustine is 43) he is in the process of becoming the Bishop of Milan and deepening his knowledge of the Christian faith. Augustine's writings are voluminous, contained in over one hundred volumes, and they evolve over time. This book comes about midpoint in Augustine's life, where he still sounds heavily Platonic. In the middle of the book, he actually becomes Bishop of Milan and stops writing the book briefly for this reason. Augustine's perspective is as an ardent convert to Christianity. Augustine was once a Manichean priest but later converted to Christianity in perhaps the most famous conversion tale in history other than that of Saul on the Road to Damascus. He is ardent believer that Christianity is true; however, he is also hostile to anti-intellectual approaches to Christian doctrine and Christian teaching and writes *De Doctrina Christiana* in order to combat those who believe they can interpret Scripture without careful study. Augustine recommends nothing short of extensive training in a wide variety of subjects in order to be able to properly understand Scripture. Thus, Augustine's perspective and biases should be clear. He is absolutely devoted to the Christian faith and believes in it wholeheartedly. His principles of Scriptural exegesis are practically built to ensure the truth of the Christian faith. Further, he writes as an ardent defender of the Roman Church against heretics such as the Donatists. He further writes as a Platonic philosopher concerned with defending scholarly approaches to Christianity.

## Tone

The tone of *De Doctrina Christiana* has several important features. It is (i) zealous, (ii) purposeful, (iii) scholarly, (iv) careful, (v) dogmatic, and (vi) authoritative. First, the tone is zealous because it issues from a man entering the Christian faith who has had a powerful conversion experience. Further, he is writing in the context of widespread heresies that he is eager to refute. For Augustine, it is crucial that Christian pastors properly interpret Scripture and communicate it effectively in order to preserve the message of the Gospel and bring sinners to the faith. The tone is also purposeful because Augustine is making a concerted effort to lay down principles of Scriptural exegesis and to teach Christian teachers how to communicate Scripture publicly. Scholarship pervades the tone as well. It is clear Augustine is not only an expert in philosophy and debate but knows Scripture very well. He often illustrates his argument with excellent examples. He proves himself knowledgeable about various grammatical forms, types of tropes, linguistic analysis and the nature of good oratory. Augustine is careful in his argument as a result since he wants to make sure that his reader understands what he is saying. Furthermore, he is dogmatic. The Scripture must be accepted in its entirety without question and it must be taught with "obedience" or authority. Because of this, the tone is authoritative. Augustine speaks as a bishop,



philosopher and Scriptural expert, one who is to be listened to and in many cases obeyed.

## Structure

The structure of *De Doctrina Christiana* has various unique features. Generally speaking, it has a preface and four "books" or long chapters. Each book covers a different topic. The first three books concern Scriptural exegesis, how to interpret Scripture. Book One covers how to divide signs and things and how to make other crucial distinctions in Scripture. It also covers the analysis of things.

Book Two covers the interpretation of unknown things and recommends great study in order to be able to uncover the meaning of these unknown signs.

Book Three covers ambiguous signs and how to delineate their meaning.

Book Four turns to teaching Christians how to be effective orators, not only in mode of speech and writing but in action.

However, the *De Doctrina Christiana* contains other important features as well. The translator provides an interesting introduction and also lists the original Latin side-by-side with the English translation. Thus, each English page on the right has a page of original Latin on the left. Further, Augustine marked off sections of the book by number, but the author combines them into larger paragraphs. The numbers can be followed to grasp the points within a single paragraph, and the paragraphs can be followed to understand the point of the book. It is worth pointing out two other features of the book: Augustine stopped writing *De Doctrina Christiana* around Book Three to become Bishop of Milan and later resumed writing. However, he never finished the last book.



## Quotes

"There are two things on which all interpretation of scripture depends: the process of discovering what we need to learn, and the process of presenting what we have learnt." (13)

"All teaching is teaching of either things or signs, but things are learnt through signs." (13)

"What I now call things in the strict sense are things such as logs, stones, sheep and so on, which are not employed to signify something." (13)

"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." (49)

"When I was writing about things I began with the warning that attention should be paid solely to the fact that they existed, and not to anything besides themselves that they might signify. Now that I am discussing signs, I must say, conversely, that attention should not be paid to the fact that they exist, but rather to the fact that they are signs, or, in other words, that they signify." (57)

"Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up." (127)

"The student who fears God earnestly seeks his will in the Holy Scriptures." (133)

"A knowledge of [tropes] is necessary for the resolution of ambiguities in Scripture because when a meaning based on the literal interpretation of the words is absurd, we must investigate whether the passage that we cannot understand is perhaps being expressed by means of one or others of the tropes." (173)

"But enough about signs, at least in their relation to words. It remains to present, in my next book, whatever the Lord prompts me to say on the subject of presenting our thoughts to others.

"It has been said by a man of eloquence, and quite rightly, that the eloquent should speak in such a way as to instruct, delight, and move their listeners." (229)

"The aim of our orator, then, when speaking of things that are just and holy and good—and he should not speak of anything else—the aim, as I say, that he pursues to the best of his ability when he speaks of these things, is to be listened to with understanding, with pleasure, and with obedience." (235)

"But in any case I thank God that in these four books I have been able to discuss, with such ability as I have, not the sort of person that I am—for I have many failings—but the sort of person that those who apply themselves to sound teaching, in other words Christian teaching, on behalf of others as well as themselves, ought to be." (285)

# Topics for Discussion

What are Augustine's primary aims in writing *De Doctrina Christiana*?

Explain the different types of signs and how Augustine thinks they should be understood.

What are the features of an eloquent Christian orator?

Describe the contrast between unknown and ambiguous signs between Book Two and Book Three.

What must a man know and possess to correctly interpret Scripture?

How does 'the law of love' form the basis for any proper exegesis of Scripture?

What is the significance of Tyconius and his writings? What are his seven principles of exegesis and how does Augustine understand them?