

A Close Reading of Augustine's *Confessions*

In the first paragraph of his *Confessions*, Augustine of Hippo provides a pithy summary of his account of how God heals our sin-distorted wills so that we may rejoice in God. In order to show that Augustine's first paragraph is a densely worded outline of his journey towards God, this paper will dig deeply into the prologue to show how it signals three promises that are fulfilled in *Confessions*. First, I'll demonstrate that the prologue signals that the account to come is one in which God is subject and Augustine is object ("God Heals"). Second, I'll examine how the prologue suggests that the object to be healed is Augustine's sinful nature ("Our Sin-Distorted Will"). Finally, I'll explore how the prologue proclaims Augustine's conclusion that the purpose of God's action is that humankind enjoy God ("So That We May Rejoice in God"). Under each of these headings, I'll consider key words and phrases in the prologue itself and consider how those denote important themes in the full account.

Part I: God Heals

God's Action

In his first paragraph, Augustine signals that the account to come is one in which God is subject and Augustine is object. He establishes in his first two sentences this subject / object relationship between God and humankind: "Great are you, O Lord.....And so we humans, who are a due part of your creation...." (3). God is, therefore humans are.

Because God is great, humans long to praise God. Augustine's echo of 2Cor 4:10a (in declaring "we...carry our mortality about with us) reinforces the subject / object scheme, for it surfaces the second part of that verse: humans carry their mortality about them "so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body" (2Cor 4:10b). The

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echo suggests that the lifetime of sin that is to be confessed will also somehow witness to the life of Jesus Christ; it will “show that this all-surpassing power [to be disclosed in the tale] is from God and not from us.”¹ When the scriptural echo is considered, the logic implied is that ‘God is great, and so the tale about to unfold of a mere clay jar will make visible not the jar but the treasure within;’ it is a story that reveals the glory of the potter (God), and not the jar (Augustine).²

Movement from Hubris to Humility

Augustine also echoes 1Pet 5:5, in noting that “God thwarts the proud.”³ Again, God is subject. The echo surfaces the second half of the verse, which proclaims that God also “gives grace to the humble” (1Pet 5:5b). The fact that Augustine begins his account with humble praise of God implies that the author is the recipient of such grace. Thus, the echo suggests that the account to follow is one in which God opposes Augustine’s hubris, humbles him, and grants the grace which evokes Augustine’s praise. As we shall see below, this movement from hubris to humility is essential in Augustine’s story.

Two Meanings of “Arouse?”

The last sentence of the prologue contains the claim that “You arouse us.” In what sense does God “arouse” humans?

¹ “But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.” (2Corinthians 4:7-10 NIV)

All scripture references in this essay are from the NIV translation, unless otherwise noted.

² The reference to a jar of clay (v.7) comes from 2Cor 4:7-12, which, in my view, is a complete textual unit, and is surfaced by Augustine’s textual echo.

³ This is also an echo of James 4:6, and Prov 3:34.

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One possible meaning of “arouse” is “to awaken.” This brings to mind the biblical metaphor of ‘sleep’ which connotes death. Thus, God awakens humans from death so that “praising” God “may bring [humans] joy.” There is ample evidence in the autobiography to suggest this meaning, for Augustine frequently contrasts the ‘death’ in sin and the ‘new life’ found in God. He declares that, “When at last I cling to you with my whole being there will be no more anguish or labor for me, and my life will be alive indeed, because filled with you” (222). To seek delight in sensuous beauty is to seek “life in the realm of death, and [a happy life] will not be found there” (66). Moreover, it was necessary for his “old nature” to die in order to give his “mind to the new life” in God (178). For Augustine, the life before faith in Christ is death from which the human ‘will’ cannot arouse itself; for, as he tried to make the decision of faith, he “shrank from dying to death and living to life, for ingrained evil was more powerful in [him] than new-grafted good” (165). He could not make the decision of faith until he “heard a voice from a house nearby” pointing him to the Word from God⁴ (168) with which God “pierced [his] heart” (201). Thus, God “arouses us” by awakening us from death to his Word.

Yet a second meaning of “arouse” is “to excite.” This connotation may include the evocation of an emotion or response, and it is often used to suggest the act of sexual attraction or desire. Here Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine* provides helpful insights into his use of “arouse.” For Augustine, “to enjoy something is to cling to it with love for its own sake;” and, only the triune God is worthy of enjoyment, because only the triune

⁴ Romans 13:13-14

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God can “make us blessed.”⁵ To cling to something other than God is to seek blessedness in that which was intended to be “used” rather than “enjoyed,” and, following biblical tradition, is idolatry. ‘*Lust*’, for Augustine, is therefore not merely sexual desire, but connotes the human desire to cling to anything other than God. Furthermore, reflecting on his theft of pears from a neighbor’s tree, Augustine observes, “A soul that turns away from you therefore lapses into *fornication* when it seeks apart from you what it can never find in pure and limpid form except by returning to you” (33-4). Thus, Augustine’s double *entendre*, “You arouse us,” also suggests that God excites a desire within us to enjoy God rather than things that are unworthy of enjoyment. To say that God arouses us is to say that God acts, and in so acting, *redirects our desires* to God-self.

“You Have Made Us and Drawn Us to Yourself”

This second sense of “arouse” unlocks the meaning of Augustine’s claim that praising God “brings us joy, because [God has] made us and drawn us to [God-self]” (3). Since only God is to be enjoyed, the purpose of all other created things is to “sustain us as we move toward blessedness.”⁶ God’s will is that we praise God (10), and we are to use created things only in our movement towards praise of God (64). That is, the purpose of created things is to sustain us as we move to our eternal “beatific homeland, a homeland to be not merely described but lived in” (142), the place where we cling to the God who “make[s] us blessed.”⁷ The phrase, “because you have made us and drawn us to yourself” (3), reflects an important theme that Augustine develops in *Con-*

⁵ MacMillan, R.W. Library of Liberal Arts, and Saint Augustine. *Augustine: On Christian Doctrine*. Prentice Hall, 1958, pp. 9-10.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

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Confessions: that God created us to enjoy God, and provided within creation those things necessary for that divine purpose to be fulfilled.

Thus, the “concerted witness of [God’s] whole creation” *drew* Augustine towards his Creator (146), for “the sky and the earth too, and everything in them - all these things around me [told] me that I should love you; and since they never cease to proclaim this to everyone, those who do not hear are left without excuse” (201). Accordingly, God has arranged creation so that “every disordered soul is its own punishment” (16). Temporal judgment *is* salvation, Augustine discovered, for “I did not escape your chastisements....You were ever present to me, mercifully angry, sprinkling very bitter disappointments over all my unlawful pleasures so that I might seek a pleasure free from all disappointment” (26). Indeed, God “sprinkled bitter gall over [his] sweet pursuits” (37). God was present to Augustine even in his “itchy lust” for unworthy things (171), for, “by ...stages I was led deeper into hell, laboring and chafing under the scarcity of truth because I was seeking you, my God...only through carnal inclination” (44). After reading Cicero’s *Hortensius*, Augustine was “aroused and kindled” by the call to wisdom (41-2), “kept...safe from the waters of the sea to bring [him] to the water of [God’s] grace” (86), convicted of Scripture’s witness (103), and “besieged by [God] on every side” (145). God thwarted the proud Augustine, taming him, laying “low the mountains and hills of [his] proud intellect and [making] of [him] an even plain”(175). God “heal[ed him] of the itch to justify [him]self ...crush[ing his] pride by inspiring in [him] reverential fear, and...[making his] neck submissive to [God’s] yoke” (235). When, at last, he was humble enough to hear, God spoke God’s Word in the garden (168), granting Augustine the “gift” of faith through Jesus Christ (3). Through the gift of faith, God

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made Augustine “feel [God’s] sweetness, and ... [gave Augustine] joy in [his] heart” (178).

Augustine could not enjoy God “until [he] embraced the mediator between God and humankind, the man Jesus Christ, who also is God supreme over all things and blessed for ever” (139). For, in spite of his return to God, temptation toward and deeply-ingrained habits of “concupiscence of the flesh and concupiscence of the eyes and worldly pride” (223) rendered him “unfit” for the life in God for which he yearned (241). Augustine is able to enjoy God - to “praise the Lord” - only by being mindful of his redemption and ransom through Christ (244).

Thus, God *drew* Augustine to God-self in Christ, healing him, so that he might find joy in God.

Part II: Our Sin-Distorted Wills

But why is it necessary for God to heal us if we are created to enjoy God? Why isn’t enjoying God a simple choice of the intellect? Why would we who long to praise God choose to cling to something unworthy even when our choice makes our hearts unquiet?

Augustine’s answer is signaled in his echo of 2Cor 4:10a (“we...carry our mortality about with us”), and in the comment that “we carry the evidence of our sin” (3). The conjunction of “our mortality” and “our sin” forms an allusion to the Fall, and Augustine turns to the Fall for an explanation of the disintegration in his soul that prevented him from clinging to God. The disintegration was caused not by his intellect, nor by an ex-

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ternal deified "Evil," but rather by the "punishment" of humankind - "the sin that dwelt within [him] as penalty for" the sin of Adam (163).

For Augustine, the sin of Adam within him was a "sickness" (163, 165) that divides the mind, causing it to be torn between conflicting wills (162-3) - "the one carnal, the other spiritual - [that in] their struggle tore [his] soul apart" (154). He was in bondage, for "the enemy had [Augustine's] power of willing in his clutches, and from it had forged a chain to bind [him]" (153). From this, Augustine deduced that "disordered lust springs from a perverted will; when lust is pandered to, a habit is formed; when habit is not checked, it hardens into compulsion" (153). Humankind's distorted nature as a result of the Fall is thus manifest as a perverted will that clings to created things rather than their Creator, leading to habitually unworthy desires "more powerful ...than new-grafted good" (165). Humans are unable to desire with undivided mind the enjoyment of God that is their purpose, for we suffer from "a sickness of the mind, which cannot rise with its whole self on the wings of truth because it is heavily burdened by habit" (163). The 'evidence of our sin' that 'we carry' is a sin-sickness that causes us to desire that which is unworthy rather than the God we long to praise. And because our sin-sickness distorts our will as a result of the Fall, it is necessary for the Creator to heal us created ones before we are able to cling to our Creator. Only when God heals us are we able to cease "will[ing] all that [we] have been wont to will, and....[will what God wills]" (170).

Part III: So That We May Rejoice in God

Our destiny is to cling to God, but we cannot because our sin-distorted will causes us to desire unworthy things. Therefore, "our heart is unquiet until it rests in [God]"

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(3). But what makes our heart 'unquiet'? By what frame of reference are we able to recognize that the idols to which we cling are not God? What propels us on our search for happiness, joy, and truth in such a way that we are restless until we find rest in God?

Augustine turns to the human memory for answers. He reasons that "unless we had some sure knowledge of [happiness], our wills would not be so firmly set on gaining it," and thus God must have planted some knowledge of joy in our memories (218). Furthermore, he reasons that "a life of happiness consists of ... enjoyment [of life]," and that the greatest joy is possible only for those who "worship" God solely "because you yourself are their joy" (218). Similarly, he observes that all humans "love truth," but could not do so "unless there was some knowledge of it in their memories" (219). Because of this instinctive love of truth, the human soul cannot "be happy until it comes to rejoice without interruption or hindrance in the very truth upon which depends whatever else is true" (220). Thus, deep in our memories are planted images of goodness and truth, and we are created with a hunger for both that propels us on a quest to cling to their source and that makes "our heart unquiet" until we rejoice in God.

Conclusion

In the prologue of his *Confessions*, Augustine provides a pithy summary of his account of how God heals our sin-distorted wills so that we may rejoice in God. The prologue signals that God is the true subject of *Confessions*, for it is the story of how God acts on Augustine by awakening him from death to life, and by exciting in him a desire to enjoy God rather than things that are unworthy of enjoyment. Because the human purpose is to enjoy God, the "concerted witness of creation" reveals God, drawing Au-

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gustine towards God while thwarting his pride and re-ordering the disordered soul that “impeded and deflected”⁸ his journey of faith. An incessant yearning for goodness and truth, images of which are planted by God in memory, propels humans on an endless quest to cling to them. Human hearts are thus “unquiet until they rest in [God]” (3).

Herein lies an important implication for ethics, for only through God's action in healing Augustine's disordered will with the gift of faith in Jesus Christ is Augustine enabled to will what God wills and thereby “burn for [God's] peace” (222). That is, it is mindfulness of his forgiven-ness - of his redemption by Christ on the Cross - that enables God's reordering of his will, so that Augustine wills what God wills.

The implication for pastoral ministry is clear. Without mindfulness of our forgiven-ness in Christ, ethical behavior - understood as obedience to the Way of Christ - is impossible. The aim of the priest therefore should be to create and nurture ‘communities of forgiven-ness’ in which disciples may learn the habits of a forgiven people.⁹

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ I must attribute this conclusion collectively to Rowan Williams, Stanley Hauerwas, and Sam Wells, whose bodies of work have impressed this way of describing the priestly vocation upon me. See especially Williams, Rowan. *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel*. Pilgrim Press, 2003; Hauerwas, Stanley, Michael G. Cartwright, and John Berkman. “The Peaceable Kingdom.” In *The Hauerwas Reader*, Duke University Press, 2001. and Wells, Samuel. *God's Companions : Reimagining Christian Ethics*. Challenges in Contemporary Theology, Malden, MA ; Oxford: Blackwell Pub, 2006.