



Why Augustine – now?¹

An African perspective

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Abstract

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*It is a fascinating fact that interest in Augustine's theology has never waned and that Protestant as well as Catholic theologians have time and again involved themselves in a study of Augustine's views. The question is: why? In this article the author attempts to formulate an answer to this intriguing question, writing from an African and a Reformed perspective. He considers five possible answers and specifically highlights Augustine's emphasis on the kingdom of God as an overriding concept in theology. The author argues that it is precisely this message of the **kingdom of God**, and not messages of secular utopias, that white **and** black Christians in South Africa need to hear today – more than anything else.*

Opsomming

Waarom Augustinus – juis nou? 'n Afrika-perspektief

Dit is 'n boeiende gegewe dat die belangstelling in die teologie van Augustinus geen einde ken nie en dat sowel Protestantse as Katolieke teoloë hulle telkens met 'n studie van sy standpunte besig hou. Die vraag is: waarom? In hierdie artikel wend die skrywer 'n poging aan om 'n antwoord op hierdie interessante vraag te formuleer, en hy skryf vanuit 'n Afrika- en 'n gereformeerde perspektief. Hy oorweeg vyf moontlike antwoorde en beklemtoon veral die aksent wat Augustinus lê op

1 Reworked version of a lecture presented at the St Augustine College of South Africa in Victory Park, Johannesburg, on the 28th of August 2003.

*die koninkryk van God as oorhoofse tema in die teologie. Die skrywer beredeneer die feit dat dit presies hiérdie boodskap van die **koninkryk van God** is, en nie boodskappe van sekulêre utopias nie, wat wit **én** swart Christene in Suid-Afrika vandag moet hoor – meer as enigiets anders.*

1. Introduction

I have been engaged in a study of Augustine for at least the past twenty years and has begun to think that I was the only theologian in South Africa who has taken an interest in Augustine, because, when one investigates contemporary Afrikaans² theological journals as well as the *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, to mention only these, one hardly finds an article on Augustine. I was thus quite amazed to receive an invitation to deliver a paper on Augustine at the *St Augustine College of South Africa* in Johannesburg – an event that made me aware of their publication the *St Augustine Papers*.

I have already written a few articles on Augustine – on his views on truth and lies, *uti* and *frui*, state and church (Van Wyk, 2001:70-152), Donatism (Van Wyk, 2002c:26-32), as well as on marriage and sexuality (Van Wyk, 2002a:327-348) and Scripture (Van Wyk, 2002b:594-601) – and I am planning to write a book on the ethics of Augustine. At this point I have a multitude of notes on the subject, waiting to be systematised. Whether I will succeed with the project, remains to be seen. Everyone who writes a book on Augustine, must do that “in a moment of madness”, as Carol Harrison (2000) writes in the foreword to her new book on Augustine. We know that there are libraries on almost every aspect of Augustine’s theology but, the last comprehensive study on the ethics of Augustine, written by Mausbach (1909), was published almost a hundred years ago (for a recent overview on Augustine’s ethics, cf. Schlabach *et al.*, 1999:320-330). To increase the problems of studying Augustine corpus of works is the fact that he himself wrote a great number of books; in the words of his biographer Possidius (*Vita*, 18:9): “so many are the works he dictated and published ... that even a student would hardly have the energy to read and become acquainted with all of them”. Somewhere, in the monastery of Isidor of Seville (560-636), one would discover the following words:

2 See in this regard: *Ned. Geref. Teologiese Studies* (Stellenbosch), *Acta Theologica* (Bloemfontein), *Verbum et ecclesia* (Pretoria), *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* (Pretoria), *In die Skriflig* (Potchefstroom.)

“Anyone who says to have read all the works [of Augustine] is a liar” (cf. Horn, 1995:22).

It is a relevant question why one should study Augustine in contemporary times. Does an orthodox theologian like Augustine, who lived 1600 years ago (354-430), have something to say to contemporary man? Are his theological insights not outdated, antiquated, irrelevant and therefore senseless to post-modern man?

I will never forget a conversation I had with the well-known and controversial Catholic theologian Hans Küng when I visited him in 1996 in Tübingen, Germany. When I told him about my study of Augustine, he reacted in astonishment: “Why Augustine now, there are much better things to do?”, he replied. (It is clear that Küng has many reservations as far as Augustine’s theology is concerned – cf. Küng, 1995:288-308).

Thus the question remains: Why Augustine – now? This question has been raised by many researchers and different answers have been presented – as we may expect (cf. Elshtain, 1998:5-15; Van Wyk, 2000:9-11, 24-25; King, 2001:1-8). To add yet another answer to this question emphasizes the everlasting importance of Augustine, this man of God.

What follows is my personal attempt at answering the question: why Augustine – now? I argue from the perspective of an Afrikaans-speaking Protestant and Reformed Christian. I also do hope that my presentation will stimulate a meaningful dialogue between Protestants and Catholics in South Africa.

2. Why Augustine – now?

2.1 Great theologian

There is considerable agreement among scholars that Augustine is one of the most important theologians who ever walked the planet earth; he is even called “the father of Western Christianity” (Noordmans, 1980:450) and referred to as “the greatest theologian of the Christian church” (Noordmans, 1986:519; cf. also Noordmans, 1933). Küng (1995:288) agrees that “no figure in Christianity between Paul and Luther has exercised greater influence in theology and the church than Augustine”. It may be an overstatement to say that while Western philosophy after Plato can be typified as footnotes for the philosophy of Plato, Western theology can be seen as footnotes for the theology of Augustine (Williams, 1955:4), but this statement gives an indication of the towering figure

of Augustine in theology in general, and in Western theology in particular. As Mount Kilimanjaro towers above the African landscape, so does Augustine tower over Western theology. It is just impossible to ignore him, at least when one wants to understand and follow the main trends in Western theology, church and society.

The greatness of Augustine can be demonstrated by the fact that he attracted not only Catholic theologians (Lombard, Aquinas, Erasmus, Pascal; Van der Meer, Courcelle, Gilson, TeSelle, Marrou) but also Protestants (Calvin, Luther, Burnaby); not only orthodox theologians (Noordmans, Sizoo, Van Oort) but also liberal theologians (Von Harnack); not only theologians but also philosophers; not only Christian philosophers (Pascal, Kierkegaard) but also atheists (Nietzsche, Camus, Wittgenstein, Kirwan) (cf. Chadwick, 1996:2-3; Horn 1995:160-165)³.

Even during his lifetime he became famous. Jerome characterized Augustine thus in a letter that he wrote to Augustine: “You are known throughout the world: Catholics honour and esteem you as the man who restored the ancient faith; and, what is a mark of greater glory, all heretics hate and denounce you” (cf. Rist, 1999: 290).

All this is said of a man who never took any course in theology and who never studied formally at any theological seminary. It is true that his mother Monnica told him the basics of the Biblical message and that he at times read the Bible, with more or less interest, but as a youngster he went his own way for many years.

We know that he turned to the study of the Bible during the years 370-373, but he was disappointed with the simple style of the Old Testament (and its problematic morality) if compared with the elegant style of Cicero (*Conf.* 3.5) – and that he joined Manicheism (for about nine years). It was during his stay in Milan (384-387/8), where he met Ambrose, that he discovered the spiritual interpretation of the Bible (*Conf.* 5.13-14). Ambrose advised him to study the prophet Isaiah⁴, a process that was interrupted and therefore without success (*Conf.* 9.5).

3 I have checked this list of names with three others, but this does not imply any form of inerrancy!

4 Later on the book of Isaiah (Ch 7:9) would play a decisive role in the epistemology of Augustine and would almost become a *Leitmotiv* (*nisi credideritis, non intellegetis* – unless you believe, you will not understand) – but his interpretation

It was only in 391 when Augustine was almost forced into priesthood in Hippo and Bishop Valerius instructed him to preach, that he asked permission to study the Bible, concentrating on the Letter to the Romans – a letter that had a profound influence on his conversion, especially the contents of Romans 13:13-14. This study of Romans was the nearest Augustine came to formal theological study. As theologian he was an autodidact (which may be a small consolation for students who suffer with their theological studies, but it is no justification to terminate all such studies – we are not Augustine, although we may be “Augustinians”!)

After he had succeeded Valerius as Bishop of Hippo (395/397), Augustine plunged into the study of the Bible and wrote many books on the Bible. His preference for the Psalms is well known. Even when he was dying he asked that “the very few Davidic Psalms on repentance (be) written out and the sheets attached to the wall opposite his bed”, as Possidius reported to us (*Vita*, 31.1). Also during his short stay in Cassiciacum, shortly after his conversion, he was deeply impressed by the Psalms of David (*Conf.* 9.4).

As a former Professor in rhetoric Augustine had at his disposal the extraordinary ability to formulate statements in an exceptional and subtle way. I supply only two examples to illustrate my point.

In two Christmas sermons (*Sermones* 195, 196; see translation of Van Neer, 1996:37, 39) he said the following:

Jesus Christ was born twice; first from the Father without a mother, and secondly from a mother without a father. Both are miraculous: the first because without a wife or mother, the second because without a husband or father.

Another example, in which he disclosed his epistemology, is extracted from a sermon (sic) on Psalm 119/118 (see translation of Van Bavel, 1996:100):

Our reason contributes to understand what we should believe, and our faith contributes to believe what we should understand.⁵

of the text was based on a (wrong) Old Latin translation (see discussions in Bright, 1999:19, 21, 213).

5 In the Afrikaans (and Dutch) the word-play is even clearer: “Ons verstand dra daartoe by om te verstaan wat ons moet glo, en ons geloof dra daartoe by om te glo wat ons moet verstaan.”

When I begin to write an article on almost any subject in dogmatics, I would always begin by reflecting on Augustine's views. He had a great mind that had an enormous influence on the Western world and is therefore never to be ignored. His monumental and voluminous heritage will always attract searching minds. His five most influential books, *De doctrina Christiana* (396; 426/427), *Confessiones* (397/401), *De Trinitate* (399-422/426), *De civitate Dei* (413/427) and *Enchiridion ad Laurentium de fide spe et caritate* (421/422), not to forget his many sermons, letters, commentaries and other books, will always be a *Fundgrube* for reflection and inspiration. As someone has said: Augustine was the first modern man.

2.2 African theologian

Africa is sometimes referred to as "the dark continent" and yet it was Africa that produced some of the finest and most illustrious theologians during the first centuries of Christian history. To mention just a few: Cyprian, Tertullian, Augustine, Athanasius, Clement and Origen. These historical facts led an African theologian to conclude: "Africa has its own theological heritage which has not been fairly acknowledged by the West" (Martey, 1993:72).

Granted, Augustine was a Roman citizen as much as he was an African (Brown, 1969:19-27); but he lived and stayed and worked most of his time in Africa, in Hippo Regius, and can therefore truly be called an African.

Living on the same continent, but in *South* Africa, one feels oneself strongly related to what happened to the Christian church in *North* Africa, although there is a time span of 1600 years separating us.

In this regard I like to indulge myself in the more or less 600 sermons of Augustine that survived, many of which have been translated into different languages. To preach the Gospel of grace to the congregation was the most important task of the bishops of North Africa in those days, also for Augustine (cf. Van der Meer, 1949). It is true that, measured by contemporary criteria for a good sermon, most of Augustine's sermons would fail the test, and yet when you read through them they forcefully impress upon you the Gospel of God's grace in Jesus Christ.

Intriguing is the way Augustine preached (or interpreted) Psalm 119 (118), in which he gave a detailed explanation of the doctrine of the

grace of God – in opposition to the views of Pelagianism⁶. It is almost as if he were reading Psalm 119 through the lenses of Paul's Letter to the Romans.

Augustine would on many occasions refer to the Biblical passage found in 1 Corinthians 4:7: "What do you have that you did not receive?" (cf. Bright, 1999:236, with reference to G. Bonner). It was Augustine's conviction that grace is gratuitous – a viewpoint that conditioned his anti-Pelagian theology.

A short excursion in this regard: It is a gross oversimplification and distortion of viewpoints to argue that in Catholicism one is saved by works and in Protestantism by grace. Also in Catholicism does grace play a role as do works in Protestantism⁷. In Calvin's *Institutes* one finds the following formulation: "It is clear that it is true that we are justified not without works but also not through works"⁸ (*Inst*, 3.16.1)⁹.

6 In his fine translation Van Bavel in his Preface made these three remarks: "Augustinus' genadeleer is de rode draad die door heel deze uitleg loopt"; "alles moeten we aan de genade van God toeschrijven"; "de genadeleer van Augustinus steunt helemaal op Paulus."

7 I remember a visit to the Catholic Seminary in Waterkloof Pretoria in 1987 when I was invited to lead an evening devotion. I reflected on Ephesians 2:8-10 and divided my message into three parts: we are saved (1) by grace, (2) through faith and (3) to do good works. I recall how surprised I was when my host assured me afterwards that he could agree with everything I said! Also Küng (1993:180) is of the opinion that "everything depends on that boundless trust in God which we call faith. That remains the central message of the New Testament: a person is 'justified' before God not by his or her works, however pious they may be, but only by an unshakeable 'faith' which trusts in God (Rom. 3.28)". See in this regard Karl Barth's amazement when Küng concluded in his doctoral thesis on justification that essentially there is no contradiction between Barth's view on justification and that of the Council of Trent: "Sie verstehen, dass mein Erstaunen bei dieser Kunde ziemlich gross war" (cf. Puchinger, 1969:45-46). (See also Küng, 1964.)

8 *Ita liquet quam verum sit, nos non sine operibus, neque tamen per opera iustificari.* See in this regard Calvin's nuanced formulation in his *Institutes* (3.14.11):

"This is the pivotal point of our disputation. For on the beginning of justification there is no quarrel between us and the sounder Schoolmen: that a sinner freely liberated from condemnation may obtain righteousness, and that through the forgiveness of sins; except that they include under the term 'justification' a renewal, by which through the Spirit of God we are remade to obedience to the law."

Calvin distinguished carefully between *declaring* a sinner just (regverdigverklaring) and *making* a sinner just (regverdigmaking) – the latter action almost to be identified with sanctification. Justification refers to the first meaning. (Catholic theology assumes that sin is eradicated by baptism.)

The real issue should be about the *nature* of grace and works – and about the *mediation* of grace. In Protestant theology faith is of fundamental and decisive importance: works are seen as a God-inspired reaction on God's grace. The emphasis is, however, never on man's effort and co-operation in the process of salvation. In Protestant theology grace is mediated not (so much) by the church and the sacraments as in Catholic theology, but by the preaching of the Gospel of grace and the Holy Spirit who revives faith in the heart¹⁰.

Back to Africa. During the first centuries of Christianity, Africa played a very important role, a role in which the figure of Augustine was very prominent. The question is whether South African Christians would learn from what happened in North Africa many centuries ago, and from the teachings of Augustine, avoiding the dangers and accepting the challenges to come.

2.3 Ecumenical theologian

Division – which is not the same as diversity – is one of the greatest challenges facing Christianity in contemporary times. West and East were divided into two parts in the eleventh century, succeeded by another schism between Catholics and Protestants in the sixteenth century, a schism that has remained intact until today.

It is true that during the past few years Lutherans and Catholics reached some form of agreement in the USA and in Germany (cf. I.W.C. van Wyk, 2001:835-867; Nürnberger, 2003: 9-25; also Jüngel, 1999), but in general terms Christianity is characterized by disunity, division, disruption and fragmentation. What we experience in daily life can never be the real unity that Christ prayed for (John 17:21).

9 See also the following: "We have said in some place that forgiveness of sins can never come to anyone without repentance ... But we added at the same time that repentance is not the cause of forgiveness of sins" (*Inst.*, 3.4.3).

10 Ott (1981:266) formulates the classical Catholic view as follows: "Die subjektive Erlösung ist aber nicht allein Gottes Werk, sondern verlangt entsprechend der Eigenart der mit Vernunft und Freiheit ausgestatteten menschlichen Natur die freie Mitwirkung des Menschen (D 799). In dem innigen Zusammenwirken und Ineinandergreifen göttlicher Kraft und menschlicher Freiheit liegt das unergründliche Geheimnis der Gnadenlehre." See the following formulations in RCC (1994:471-476): "Justification establishes *cooperation between God's grace and man's freedom*"; the *preparation for man* for the reception of grace is already a work of grace"; "grace is first and foremost the gift of the Spirit who justifies and sanctifies us"; "the merits of our good works are gifts of the divine goodness". For a Reformed perspective, see Berkouwer (1955:103-152).

The interesting thing is that Protestant and Catholic Christians somehow find some common grounds in Augustine. If Pope Pius IX could refer to Augustine with *noster est*, Luther with *meus totus* and Calvin with *totus noster* (cf. Van Wyk, 2001:122), then somehow the two main Western Christian traditions meet each other in Augustine.

From a Protestant perspective the Reformation of the sixteenth century is seen as nothing less than a rediscovery of the theology of Augustine. Calvin's *Institutes* bristles with references to and quotations from the works of Augustine (cf. extensively Lange van Ravenswaay, 1999; for an overview Marshall, 1999:116-120), specifically Augustine's doctrine on sin and grace¹¹. The Reformers regained, or rediscovered, nevertheless revived, the doctrine of God's free grace in Jesus Christ, in strong contrast to any form of Pelagianism or semi-Pelagianism (cf. Grabowski, 1957).

It seems to me that when Protestants and Catholics want to reduce (and overcome) the gap between them, they have to rediscover their common heritage in the theology of Augustine, that is almost the same as to say that they have to rediscover the true message of Paul, the New Testament and of the whole Bible.

Augustine was a man of the church and his activities as a writer was essentially inspired by pastoral aims and almost always adapted to practical needs. He also held the unity of the church of Christ in high esteem; for Augustine the church could only be the *one* undivided church of Christ. His lifelong struggle for the unity of the Catholic Church in North Africa against the Donatists (cf. Van Wyk, 2001: 351-356), who established a new church, is a living memory of the passion that Augustine revealed for the *unam sanctam catholicam et apostolicam ecclesiam*.

The schism between Catholics and Donatists (cf. Van Wyk, 2002c: 26-32) started during the severe persecution by Caesar Diocletian in 303-305 when some Christians and bishops (Catholics) were willing to turn in (*traditio*) their Bibles and other documents to the authorities while others (Donatists, called after Bishop Donatus) refused to do so. Donatists accused Catholics of the betrayal of the message and person of Christ, and of hypocrisy, and therefore denied Catholic bishops legitimacy, rebaptized Catholics and viewed the Donatist Church as the only true and pure church of Christ.

11 It is well known that while Calvin associated with Augustine as far as dogmatics (doctrine) is concerned, he found Chrysostom's exegesis of Scripture more helpful.

Augustine, on the other hand, argued that the church of Christ is catholic, undivided and ecumenical; the church in this world will always be a *corpus permixtum*. He asked how those (the Donatists) who had departed from the church, could still be in Christ, for they did not belong to the body of Christ any more.

That in the end Augustine went too far, accepted state intervention and finally the persecution of the Donatists, after many attempts to convince the Donatists to return to the Catholic Church, can be explained, even understood, but never justified. Although persecuted, Donatists managed to survive in rural areas until the seventh century when Christianity in North Africa was overwhelmed by Islam (Frend, 1952:315, 316). The irony of these sad events was that “the efficiency of the Catholics had the paradoxical result of being a factor in the permanent loss of North Africa to Christendom” (Frend, 1952:313-314).

The church struggle in North Africa reveals to us the complexity of the relation between the *unity* and the *sanctity* of the church. The Donatists emphasized the sanctity but thereby lost the unity; Augustine stressed the unity but (almost) at the cost of the sanctity. In the long history of the universal Christian church it seems as though the secret of the relation between unity and sanctity has not been revealed to anyone. The only thing that we know for sure is that the nearer we live to God and to Christ, the nearer we come to one another; the more we are guided by the Spirit and Gospel of Christ, the more we will recognise one another as brothers and sisters in the Lord. All those who know the good Shepherd will listen to his voice and there shall be one flock and one shepherd (John 10:16).

2.4 Kingdom theologian

Sometimes I wonder whether it is not *this* aspect of Augustine’s theology that fascinates me most – as perceived from the perspective from an Afrikaans-speaking Christian.

The history of apartheid is well known to all of us. It is not just a story of Afrikaner nationalism but of Afrikaner imperialism, the sad story of a small minority dominating the whole of South Africa for almost half a century (1948-1994). That ideology and period of time are something of the past now and the Afrikaner imperium that gave shelter to so many Afrikaners, has totally collapsed, resulting in great frustration and disorientation among many Afrikaner people. Many people experience their present situation as that of a

marginalised group. A non-Afrikaner cannot imagine the disillusionment among Afrikaners today, especially among young Afrikaners¹².

The question is pressing: How can they, and all the white people in South Africa, yes, white *and* black people, reorientate themselves finding a new direction and a new meaning to life?

It is precisely in *this* regard that the message of Augustine – indeed the message of Christ – becomes as relevant as never before.

In his magnum opus, *De civitate Dei*, Augustine presented us with a theology of the kingdom of God, which is simultaneously a theology of hope. During his lifetime Augustine himself experienced the downfall of Rome and the Roman Empire (410), an event that had a devastating effect on the church and society of those days. In his masterwork, written between 413-429, Augustine refuted the arguments of the heathens: Rome had fallen because of moral decadence and pride, Augustine argued. In the last twelve books he developed the theme of the two cities, the *civitas Dei* and the *terrena civitas*, their origin, development and destination (cf. Van Wyk, 2001:133-152).

“There are no more than two kinds of human society, which we may call two cities, according to the language of our Scriptures”, Augustine argued. “The one consists of those who wish to live after the flesh, the other of those who wish to live after the spirit” (*civ. Dei*, 14.1). There is a life according to man and a life according to God (14.4; 15.8); a life of selflove and a life of love for God (14.13; 15.3); a life of humility and a life of pride (*hubris*) (14.28). Both cities reside in this world, but intertwined and mixed (10.32; 11.1; 16.10,54). The *terrena civitas* is founded on selflove (*amor sui*), desire (*cupiditas*) and pride (*superbia*), characteristics that manifest themselves in the lust for power (*libido dominandi*). While the *civitas Dei* is characterized by love and charity, the *terrena civitas* is distinguished by domination and exploitation.

12 I refer in this regard to the movements *Praag*, *Groep 63* and even the *Boeremag*. It is interesting to note that *Groep 63* is not satisfied with the transition of 1994 to a *liberal* democracy, because they argue that only a *pluralistic* (inclusive) democracy can bring peace to the country in the long run. They campaign therefore for – what they call – “successive settlements” – the 1994 election being no final arrangement. See extensively Giliomee (2003:634-666). Note-worthy is also the attempt by the South African Council of Churches to open discussions with Afrikaans-speaking churches and organisations concerning experiences of alienation by Afrikaners (*Rapport*, 13-08-2003:19).

Augustine warns us against the lust for domination (*libido dominandi*) that perverts all human relations; “he left as a permanent legacy a condemnation of that lust for dominion that distorts personality, marriage, family, and all other aspects of political and social life” (Elshtain, 1998:12).

Although Augustine credited the earthly city with many things, he also clarified the provisional and transitional character of earthly kingdoms. Christians are pilgrims to a greater fatherland. No human society can ever be a full *replica* of the heavenly city, at best only a dull *reflection* of it. We live and work in a sinful world, which in the end can only be perfected by God alone with the presentation of a new heaven and a new earth.

This message of North Africa is what we need to hear in South Africa, not as a means of escapism and isolation from the world, but as a sign of hope and orientation in a bewildered world. This message implies: do not put your trust in earthly kingdoms, whether white or black, small or big. The coming of the kingdom of God is the essence, the meaning, the aim and the fulfilment of all history, and that kingdom should be sought first and in all things (Matt. 6:33). Of course, each of us has a task from God to fulfil on earth, a mandate to work and to care (Gen. 2:15), and we have to fulfil that to the last, but our final destination is the kingdom of God, the new heaven and the new earth (2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1). Our earthly labour and earthly kingdoms should be directed to the coming of the kingdom God, which will be a kingdom of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom. 14:17).

This message can give new orientation and direction to Afrikaners, to whites, to blacks and to all South Africans. It warns us against every attempt to glorify, to absolutise and to idolise our own earthly and transitory kingdoms. It is not the end of the world if an earthly kingdom collapses, it may even be a sign of the coming of the kingdom of God (Matt. 24:8).

2.5 Biblical theologian

The last aspect that I wish to discuss to illustrate why I appreciate Augustine, is his biblical approach of theological, moral and ecclesiological issues (for references, cf. Van Wyk, 2002b:594-601; Bright, 1999). It is of course true that Augustine was deeply influenced by philosophy and specifically Neo-Platonism (Plotinus, Porphyry), but when one studies Augustine’s work, and especially his sermons, one experiences how his philosophy is exceeded and

(so to speak) overruled by his theology and the message of the Bible. Not that he totally escaped from the influence of philosophy – who can? – but the message of the Gospel, God’s good news of grace and salvation for sinners, is so strong and overwhelming that time and again it is unmistakably perceived, even though sometimes in philosophical formulations. The message of the Letters of Paul – especially on sin and grace – became decisive in the theology of Augustine (*Conf.* 7.21).

Because I stand in the Reformed tradition, where there is so much emphasis on the *sola Scriptura*, the *one* source and norm for church and theology, one can understand my appraisal for Augustine in this regard. I immediately admit the difficulty – even for Reformed theologians – to cling to their own confession that reads as follows:

Neither may we consider any writings of men, however holy these may have been, of equal value with those divine Scriptures, nor ought we to consider custom, or the great multitude, or antiquity, or succession of times and persons, or councils, decrees or statutes, as of equal value with the truth of God, since the truth is above all (Belgica, Art 7).

If it can be proved that a synod or council makes a decision contrary to Scripture, and a synod or council would refuse to revise that decision, we describe (and criticise) that as synodocracy. Such a standpoint undermines the rule of Christ (Christocracy) as well as the authority of the Bible.

I know that Holy Scripture is held in high esteem in the Catholic Church too and that the *magisterium* does not stand above the Word of God, as *Dei Verbum* (2.10) has it.¹³ But then there is also the formulation that holy Scripture is “not the only (source)”¹⁴ from which the Church draws her certainty regarding what is revealed. “Therefore *both* [holy Tradition and holy Scripture] should be accepted and venerated with the *same* affection and reverence” (*Dei Verbum*, 2.9 – italics mine – JHvW). In Protestantism it is inconceivable that a church (council or synod) could formulate and promulgate any doctrine without Biblical substantiation¹⁵.

13 *Quod quidem Magisterium non supra verbum Dei est, sed eidem ministrat.*

14 *Non per solam Sacram Scripturam hauriat.*

15 Cf. in this regard the immaculate conception of Mary (1854), the infallibility of the pope (1870) and the assumption of Mary (1950). See Jonker (1979) and De Klerk (1952).

Maybe Catholics and Protestants can find some common ground even here when we turn to Augustine. It is a totally confusing scenario to argue that in Catholicism Holy Scripture has little or no authority, and to assume that in Protestantism the tradition plays no role and does not sometimes overrule Scripture. Catholics do appreciate the Scriptures¹⁶ and Protestants obey synodical decisions¹⁷. The issue, however, is about the *nature* of church tradition and the *weight* awarded to it. Can church decisions and traditions be rectified if they contradict the Biblical teaching, and do we accept the Word of God as highest authority, yes or no?

The promise of Jesus Christ that the Holy Spirit will guide the disciples of Christ into all truth (John 16:33), is not given only to Catholics and not only to Protestants¹⁸. While there is no truth without the *Word of God* (John 17:17), without *Jesus Christ* (John 14:6), there is also no truth if we do not *walk* continually in God's truth (Ps. 26:3; 86:11) and if we do not *live* by the truth (John 3:21).

Augustine succeeded in relating Holy Scripture and tradition in such a way that Scripture always received the highest authority. It is true that he once wrote: "I would not believe the Gospel, if the authority of the Catholic Church did not move me"¹⁹ (cf. Bright, 1999:213), a statement which must not be understood in isolation but in the context of Augustine's theology in its totality. Considered in this way, in his *De civitate Dei* he could refer to (canonical) Scripture "which has paramount authority" (11.3) and "whose authority we prefer to all writings whatsoever" (14.7). According to Augustine Christians are sustained by divine authority in the history of their religion, and

16 I am presently co-promoter of a doctoral thesis written by a Catholic, Sr. Patricia Jordan, in which she frequently uses Scripture as an authoritative source for theology. The title of the thesis is: "A spirituality of the heart in the context of the Franciscan eremitical tradition".

17 See GKSA *Church Order* Art. 31: "Whatever may be agreed upon by a majority vote [in a major ecclesiastical assembly] shall be considered settled and binding, unless it be proved to conflict with the Word of God or with the Articles of the Church Order."

18 It is interesting to note that Erasmus used this argument to checkmate Luther: Luther presupposed that the Holy Spirit led the church in untruth for many centuries. "Wer könnte glauben dass dieser Geist viele hundert Jahre lang einen Irrtum seiner Kirche absichtlich übersehen habe" (cf. Berkouwer, 1970:224-225). Berkouwer (1970:213) refers to this matter (the fact that the Holy Spirit could fail the church for so long and could hand it over to decline and error) as "de allerdiepste vraag ten aanzien van de continuïteit der kerk".

19 *Evangelio non crederem nisi me catholicae ecclesiae commoveret auctoritas.*

they have “no doubt that whoever is opposed to it is most false” (18.40).

Augustine views *love (caritas)* as a hermeneutic key to unlock the treasures of Scripture (*doc. Chr. 3.15.23*) – love then defined as “the motion of the soul toward the enjoyment of God for his own sake, and the enjoyment of one’s self and of one’s neighbour for the sake of God” (*doc. Chr., 3.10.16*).

It is true that many contemporary theologians would find Augustine’s interpretation of the Bible sometimes too biblicistic and fundamentalistic, but it is always worthwhile and most of the time enriching to consider his views.

As far as the doctrine of Scripture is concerned, the discussion between Catholics and Protestants must continue, and because all of us view Augustine as a source of reference, maybe we can find some common ground in Augustine’s theology, for Augustine was a teacher of Scripture, a teacher of love, God’s love for us, our love for God and one another.

3. Conclusion

I would have liked also to deal with Augustine’s views on faith, hope and love, topics on which he wrote a fine book, already referred to. Also his views on topics like grace, freedom, happiness and truth. Augustine can quite justly be typified as a theologian of faith, a theologian of hope and a theologian of love; also a theologian of grace, of freedom, happiness and truth. It is, however, not possible to explore and exhaust the richness of his theology in one article. To any serious Augustinian scholar, it however, remains consoling and rewarding that the theology of Augustine is widely appreciated – even today! May his views inspire and stimulate us on “the long walk to (total) freedom” and to the new city of God.

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20 The first two sources mentioned in the Bibliography, contain the original writings of Augustine to which the translations used in the article refer.

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Key concepts:

African theologian: Augustine

Augustine: ecumenical theologian; kingdom theologian; biblical theologian

Augustine's relevancy for today

Kernbegrippe:

Afrika-teoloog: Augustinus

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Augustinus se relevansie vir vandag