

A FEW OBSCURE MEN: AUGUSTINE'S RECEPTION OF SAINT PAUL'S *IGNOBILITAS*

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In June of 2009, Vatican officials announced the unearthing of what is now believed to be the oldest depiction of St. Paul the Apostle. Discovered in the Roman Catacomb of St. Thekla along the Via Ostiense—not far from St. Paul Outside the Walls, where the Apostle was legendarily buried—this fresco is dated to the latter part of the fourth century. Such archeological evidence supports what scholars see as the intellectual fervor of this period. Peter Brown, for example, names this time in the Church “the generation of St. Paul.”¹ Similarly referring to this same time period, Carol Harrison maintained that, “Paul was not only in the air, he blew through Western Christianity like a whirlwind.”² Whereas the earliest New Testament commentaries focused primarily on the Gospels, and especially on the Lord’s prayer, by 400 AD, the Pauline epistles were the driving force of Christian thought.³ With Paul, the taxonomy and attendant theologies of grace and freewill (1 Cor 4), of bodily redemption (1 Cor 15), of God’s loving some and hating others (Rom 9), of how Christian charity has replaced the Jewish law (Gal 3), and the way these new believers should begin to conduct themselves in the world and in the Church (1 Tim 3), were all eagerly found.

The end of the fourth century marked a decided shift in the churchmen’s serious study of Paul’s letters, signaling a new widespread concentration on the Apostle’s theology. As in so many things, Origen (†254) stands out as a precocious and prodigious writer, laying the groundwork for this movement

¹ Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 141.

² Carol Harrison, *Rethinking Augustine’s Early Theology: An Argument for Continuity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 115.

³ The earliest commentaries on any selection of the New Testament are Tertullian’s, Origen’s, and Cyprian’s reflections on the “Our Father.” On this, see *On the Lord’s Prayer*, ed. Alistair Stewart-Sykes (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2004). It was not until around the mid-fourth century that Latin theologians (especially) began to take up sustained reflections on St. Paul’s writings. For more on this shift to Paul, see Alexander Souter, *The Earliest Latin Commentaries on the Epistles of St. Paul* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927); Maurice F. Wiles, *The Divine Apostle: The Interpretation of St. Paul’s Epistles in the Early Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967); J. Ries, “Saint Paul dans la formation de Mani,” in J. Reis, F. Decret, W. H. C. Frend, and M. G. Mara, *Le Epistole paoline nei Manichaei, i Donasti e il primo Agostino* (Rome: Istitutum Patristicum Augustinianum, 1989), 7–27.

by composing a whopping fifteen-book commentary on Romans. But by the end of the fourth century, the great Archbishop of Constantinople, John Chrysostom (†407), had also delivered 244 sermons on Paul, and at least thirteen commentaries from various Greek theologians survive from this time. In the West, the fervor was no less obvious: by 350, Marius Victorinus emerged as the first author of a Pauline commentary in Latin. Thereafter, the otherwise anonymous Ambrosiaster, Pelagius, Jerome, Gennadius of Marseilles, and others turned to Paul to understand better the role of grace and the broken condition of those in dire need of it.

At the end of his life's journey, Augustine of Hippo himself (354–430) looked back and admitted that while he “was still a presbyter, it happened that the Apostle's Epistle to the Romans was read among us who were together at Carthage,” and it fell upon the learned Augustine to elucidate some of the more obscure passages found therein.⁴ As a newly chrismed preacher, Augustine realized quickly how he needed more intentional study of these Sacred Scriptures. Forced out of his desire for monastic *otium* and pressed into priestly ordination in 391, Augustine hastily wrote to his ordinary, the aged Bishop Valerius of Hippo, requesting what would amount to a Lenten retreat with the writings of Saint Paul. Only months after Augustine's ordination in the Barque of Peter, he complained that even though Valerius had made him second in command at the helm, he himself barely knew how to hold an oar. As Serge Lancel has rightly noticed, at this early stage of his public ecclesial service, “Augustine would soon feel the need to go more deeply into reading the Pauline epistles.”⁵ The young Father Augustine therefore petitioned for a “a period of retreat for gaining knowledge of the divine scriptures” (*uacationis tempore ad cognoscendas diuinas scripturas*).⁶ The result of this early time of Lenten study would be a lifetime of a theology marked by St. Paul's emphasis on the absolute necessity of grace, the indispensable role of the Holy Spirit in imparting such new life, and the inscrutable will of God.

The present essay will examine how Augustine appropriated Paul. As one looks at the trajectory of Augustine's massive output, one quickly realizes that there was never really a time when Augustine was not looking toward Paul: from his earliest encounters with the Christian Scriptures, to his landmark *taking up and reading* in a Milanese garden, to his refuting the Pelagians from North Africa to Southern Gaul in his final days, the Pauline corpus informed Augustine lifelong. We should therefore resist speaking of

⁴ Augustine, *Revisions* 1.23[22].1, in *Revisions*, trans. Boniface Ramsey (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2010), 93.

⁵ Serge Lancel, *St. Augustine*, trans. Antonia Nevill (London: SCM Press, 2002), 177.

⁶ Augustine, Epistle 21.3, trans. Roland Teske, in *Letters 1–99* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2001), 56 (CSEL 34.51).

a Pauline conversion or even of a revival in Augustine's thought; we should look, rather, at why Augustine turned to Paul when he did. Since Paul is the music Augustine's ear is attuned to his entire life, this essay will proceed in three main sections.

In "The Prelude," we shall see how the early thought of Augustine was informed by Paul's theology. Here we shall come to understand that while Augustine had never really deserted Paul, it was Paul who allowed him to be lifted out of the quagmires of Manichaeism and strict Neoplatonism. Augustine's intellectual life appropriated Paul very early on: as a Manichean, Augustine would have read selected excerpts; it is to Paul that he turns—decidedly—in the garden; and in his Cassiciacum writings and when he was an early pastor of souls, it was Paul who lifted Augustine out of his self-assurance and reoriented him radically toward the graced will of God. Paul was thus the one who slowly made Christianity credible, the one whose supposed lack of eloquence spoke brilliantly of supernatural realities while never contradicting the truths once found in the *libros Platoniorum*.

The second section will then serve as "The Overture," an examination of the long years of pastoral work in the dusty plains of the Mauritania, when the Pauline epistles acted to establish God's gratuitousness as the firm foundation of all of Augustine's theology. In this section, we will move from the new emphasis on grace's working in the *Ad Simplicianum* to the use of Paul, the great convert, against Donatist rigorism.

Lastly, "The Finale" will treat Augustine's latter years, against the Pelagians, when reading Paul correctly was the issue dividing the Church, and the last debate to which Augustine gave the final years of his busy life. Of all the factors involved in this heated dispute, we shall focus mainly on Romans 5:12 and what it rightly means to have all humankind sin in Adam.

The Prelude

In her entry under "Paul" in *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, Paula Fredriksen calls Augustine's first sustained approach to the New Testament a "staccato composition of a series of Pauline commentaries" lasting throughout the last decade of the fourth century.⁷ During this rather fruitful time, Augustine drew up: two commentaries on Romans in 394–395 (*Expositio quarundum propositionum ex epistula apostoli ad Romanos* [Ex prop. Rm.] and the *Epistulae ad Romanos inchoata expositio* [Ep. Rm. inch.]), both his *Commentary on Galatians* (Ex. Gal.) and the central part of his *De diuersis quaestionibus* (diu. Qu.) (treating Romans 7–9) in 395, the *Ad Simplicianum* (Simpl.) in 396, his renowned *Confessions* (Conf.) in 397, and the *Contra Faustum* (c. Faust.) in 398,

⁷ Paula Fredriksen, "Paul," in *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Allan Fitzgerald, O.S.A. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 621–25, at 622.

in the last of which Paul appears as the central censor and corrector to any Manichean misreadings of Scripture. These early staccato pieces provide the foundation of Augustine's understanding of how God and humanity interact, the nature of the Church, the eschatological mission of the Christian life, as well as the absolute and utterly unassailable need for divine grace.

Students of Augustine first meet their teacher as he himself is studying the art of rhetoric. During those heady days of studying the Latin masters of oratory, Augustine mocked the Christian's Scriptures for their perceived insipience. Compared to the "dignified prose" of Cicero, the Bible seemed relatively unworthy (*indigna*) of Augustine's time and mental energies.⁸ With no proper training in how to read the depths of the Scriptures rightly, the callow and conceited Augustine dismissed them as mere folly. This is why he was so embarrassed years later to realize that he had pushed Paul aside in order to embrace the "absurdities" (*nugas*) of the Manichean myths.⁹ But here he found an answer, albeit facile, to a question that haunted him forever: *unde malum?* From where does evil come?

Perplexed deeply by the problem of evil in the world, Augustine was lured into the easy theodicy of the Manicheans. Here inherent good battled against inherent evil, an account that not only provides a facile solution to the problem of evil but also exculpates any struggling sinner from any personal moral wrongdoing. Evil was simply an inextricable fact of this divided and dualistic cosmos. But even here Augustine would not have been asked to abandon Paul, but would simply have to read him differently. We know, for example, that the celebrated Manichean elder Fortunatus appeals to Romans 7 to explain the inevitability of the war between good and evil.¹⁰ Like the Gnostic Marcion well before them, the Manicheans of Augustine's day bowdlerized the Pauline epistles in order to make them suit their dualism and deprecation of the material order, providing Augustine with at least a decade of Paul's own questions to resolve properly. Or in the words of Peter Brown, "at that time, Augustine had the most radical and self-confident of Paul's expositors in mind, the Manichees: they were responsible for most of the specific questions which Augustine had to resolve for his audience at Carthage."¹¹ From student of rhetoric to an auditor of the Manicheans, then, the Christian Bible—and Paul in particular—remained a constant in our young seeker's search for truth.

⁸ Augustine, *Confessions* (hereafter, *Conf.*) 3.5.9, trans. Maria Boulding, O.S.B., ed. David Vincent Meconi, S.J. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012).

⁹ Augustine, *Conf.* 3.10.18.

¹⁰ See, for example, Augustine, *Contra Fortunatum* 21.

¹¹ Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 144. For an example of how the Manichees read Scripture to fit their purposes, see Augustine, *On Genesis*, esp. 1.2.3.

When Augustine moved to Milan in 383, he was clearly dissatisfied with the Manichean cult. Watching and listening to such Christian sages as the aged Simplicianus and the fiery bishop of Milan, Augustine's mind was illuminated by two complementary strands of insight: (1) the way Bishop Ambrose could interpret the story of Scripture allegorically so as not to offend basic human reason,¹² but also (2) the Neoplatonic insistence that there is more to reality than the visible and material.¹³ In this convergence, Augustine returned to the familiar Bible of his past with a new zeal (*auidissimie*) and appreciation for the unity of Scripture:

I seized on the hallowed calligraphy of your Spirit, and most especially the writings of the apostle Paul. In earlier days it had seemed to me that his teaching was self-contradictory, and in conflict with the witness of the law and the prophets, but now as these problems melted away your chaste words presented a single face to me, and I learned to rejoice with reverence.¹⁴

From his education in oratory to his time as a Manichean and up through his embracing the thought of the Platonists, Paul never left Augustine: whether it be Plotinus or the Psalms, it was the Apostle who acted as the corrective to either the pride of Platonic ascent without grace or the slavish literalism of reading the Old Testament. In the gaze of this "single face" (*una facies*), Augustine was finally released from thinking of the Old Testament as the reflection of the *summum malum* who immersed us in matter and demanded the blood sacrifices of a morally suspicious people and of the New Testament as the covenant of spiritual release unto the *summum bonum* and the subsequent sloughing off of all things weighty and moribund. Fleeing such division, Augustine is finally able to rejoice (*exsultare*), as Paul insists on the unity of Scripture and the inherent goodness of the created order.

It should come as no surprise, then, when we join Augustine and companions at Cassiciacum, to read that he ascribes his intellectual awakening to reading St. Paul rightly. Thanking Romanianus for his generosity during those years, praying and thinking in his country estate in Cassiciacum ("When I was an impoverished young man setting out on my studies away from home, you welcomed me into your house, into your munificence"¹⁵), Augustine thanks his patron for providing the groundwork for this fledgling

¹² Augustine, *Conf.* 5.14.24.

¹³ Augustine, *Conf.* 7.1.1–2.

¹⁴ Augustine, *Conf.* 7.21.27.

¹⁵ Augustine, *Contra academicos* (hereafter, *c. Acad.*) 2.2.3, in *Against the Academicians*, trans. Peter King, (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1995), 27.

philosophical community. Yet, as Augustine looks back, it is not so much the Greek and Roman authors that stand out as the intellectual fuel for this “incredible inferno” (*incredibile incendium*), but Paul:

Now I confess that I looked back on the religion implanted in us as boys, binding us from the marrow, as though from a long journey's end. Yet it was actually drawing me to itself without my realizing it. And so stumbling, hastening, hesitating I snatched up the Apostle Paul. . . . I read all of it with the greatest attention and the greatest care.¹⁶

By sitting studiously with Paul, Augustine the recently retired rhetor had come to see how his life had all along been an incessant invitation to appropriate the graces that were bestowed in infancy (“I was regularly signed with the cross and given his salt”¹⁷). The Pauline epistles, therefore, are what finally helped the proud Augustine realize that imitating the Catholic example displayed by his seemingly simplistic mother, Monica, was in fact a supremely intelligent act.¹⁸

So what was it that Augustine found in those early years of reading Saint Paul? First and foremost, the most significant contribution that the Apostle's epistles made to Augustine's emerging theological macrostructure was the absolute insistence on grace. Notoriously first in his classes,¹⁹ advancing rapidly up the imperial ladder as the emperor's sanctioned orator,²⁰ brilliant in disputation and seemingly above any real religious demands made upon him, the pages of Paul finally brought Augustine low—humbling him not in the estimation of his brilliance, but in its origin. Paul was the one who thus overcame Augustine's inflated self-assurance, teaching him that the only reality one can claim wholly for oneself is one's own sin.

This is why the first treatises we have, the dialogues from Cassiciacum and the early works of his ordained life, all rely on Paul to insist that as important as intellectual and moral excellence may be to human flourishing, nothing natural saves. As we mentioned earlier, Augustine was careful to read Plato and Paul in unison, never letting truth compete against or contradict

¹⁶ Augustine, *c. Acad.* 2.25 (p. 30–31).

¹⁷ Augustine, *Conf.* 1.11.17.

¹⁸ This way of looking at Augustine's life reinforces Harrison's thesis that there was never a time in which Augustine was not a Christian (*Rethinking Augustine's Early Theology*, 154–56). Unlike the more popular view that Augustine left the Christ of his childhood behind during his Manichean and Neoplatonic searches, I agree with Harrison that what we see in the later Augustine's emphasis on grace and his obvious need for a divine savior had always been in his worldview *in nuce*.

¹⁹ Augustine, *Conf.* 1.17.27.

²⁰ Augustine, *Conf.* 5.13.23.

truth. Yet what Augustine discovered in St. Paul was the corrective that any proud philosopher needed: the humbling gift of worship and the consequent admittance to supernatural assistance in thinking and living rightly. This is how the strict followers of Plato claim to be wise while, really, in their ignorance of the one true God, they prove to be dim-witted (Rom 1:21–22) and in need of grace.²¹

The philosopher's so-called wisdom paling to the Apostle's supposed ignobility emerges as a common trope for Augustine as he surveys the history of thought. What makes Paul's writings so perennially challenging is not the persuasiveness of their eloquence, but the profundity of their truth. Philosophers of old fooled Augustine long enough. As he continued to contemplate the Church's Scriptures, he came to "withdraw the service of [his] tongue from the market of speechifying."²² Paul himself was the one who proposed celibacy to Augustine²³ as a better way (*ad melius*), and it was Paul who supplied Augustine with the initial framework of his earliest attempt at historiography, sketching out his first sweeping view of humanity:

Let us distinguish these four stages of man: prior to the Law; under the Law; under grace; and in peace. Prior to the Law, we pursue fleshy concupiscence; under the Law, we are pulled by it; under grace, we neither pursue nor are pulled by it; in peace, there is no concupiscence of the flesh. . . . Thus here he [the Apostle] shows us we still have desires but, by not obeying them, that we do not allow sin to reign in us. But these desires arise from the mortality of the flesh, which we bear from the sin of the first man, whence we are born fleshy. Thus they will not cease save at the resurrection of the body, when we will have merited that transformation promised to us. Then there will be perfect peace, when we have been established in the fourth stage.²⁴

Without Paul it is hard to imagine Augustine escaping the schizophrenia of the Manicheans and the puffed-up pride of the Platonists. However, Paul not only provided Augustine with an antidote against error, he also provided him with provisions for building his consistent theological and pastoral approaches. It is to these sustained years of ecclesial service that we now turn.

²¹ Augustine, *Conf.* 7.9.15.

²² Augustine, *Conf.* 9.2.2.

²³ Augustine, *Conf.* 8.1.2.

²⁴ Augustine, *Exp. prop. Rm.* 12, in *Augustine on Romans: Propositions from the Epistle to the Romans: Unfinished Commentary*, trans. Paul Fredriksen Landes (Chico, CA: Scholar Press, 1982), 5, 7.

The Overture

Most of Augustine's pastoral and priestly life is spent as a bishop in a relatively small Roman town on the shores of Latin Africa. He was never able to enjoy the luxury needed to compose theological treatises apart from the occasions when asked to answer a particular and pressing problem. It is clear, however, that wherever Augustine went, his presence was enduring, leaving people wanting more of him. Through letter and courier, he was bombarded with requests to clarify some doctrinal query. But no exchange marked his life's work more than the requests he received "from that saintly old man [*a sancto sene*] who later became bishop of Milan," Simplician.²⁵ Sometime around 395 Augustine received letters from his onetime spiritual father Simplician (who would serve as bishop of Milan from 397 to 400), who was in need of rightly understanding a large section of Paul, mainly Romans 7 and 9. Augustine's response would mark his first episcopal treatise (396–397), but even more importantly, it would set him on a trajectory in which Paul's theology of grace became the Archimedean point upon which all other Augustinian understandings of God and the ones God came to save would pivot.

At stake here were two interlocking doctrines: the graciousness of Love and the utter inability of the fallen children of Adam to save themselves. Grace bridges these two contraries, and in the mediator Jesus Christ, sinners become saints. Textually, what confounded Simplician was precisely how to envision Paul's teaching that God loved Jacob but hated Esau (Rom 9:10–29). This query occasioned perhaps the most commented upon moment of Augustine's life, his conversion in the garden. For where some scholars see Augustine simply evolving as a theologian in his new role as *episcopus*, others see "a veritable revolution in his theology."²⁶

This watershed moment was first popularized through Brown's groundbreaking biography in 1965. Brown uses the *Ad Simplicianum* to emphasize Augustine's new awareness that he "would never achieve the concentrated tranquility of the supermen that still gaze out at us from some mosaics in Christian churches and from the statues of pagan sages."²⁷ As Brown sees it, wrestling with St. Paul, Augustine lost and was pinned to his own insufficiency to initiate any good work whatsoever. Brown goes on to argue that this proved to be the beginning of the existentialist Augustine's romanticism when he became viscerally aware of his own brokenness and consequent need for divine assistance. Harrison, however, disagrees with this watershed thesis

²⁵ Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 10.29, in *The City of God, Books 1–10*, trans. William Babcock (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2012), 341.

²⁶ Thomas Martin, O.S.A., "Simplicianum, Ad," in Fitzgerald, *Augustine through the Ages*, 798–99, at 798.

²⁷ Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 150.

and convincingly argues that Augustine simply deepened his appreciation for grace in his replies to Simplician and allowed his growing attentiveness to God's agency in his quest for wholeness to become ever more real.

What scholars have noticed is that toward the middle of the *Ad Simplicianum*, Augustine no longer situates the cry for salvation in the will of the human individual. It is not we who reach out in search of a divine healer, as this would still be a merit-based account of salvation. God would inevitably be seen to "reward" those who cry out to him. By the end of the second part of this important work, then, Augustine no longer can maintain that the human will has anything meritorious enough to effect God's grace but it is always God's will who gratuitously effects one's will rightly in order to cry out to him. As important as this development is in understanding Augustine's growth of a theology of grace, what is important for our purposes in this section is that Augustine never quits listening to the Apostle, but at Simplicianus's behest, listens to him anew, in a way that endures a lifetime. That is, in reflecting deeply on Romans 7 and 9, the new bishop of Hippo comes to realize St. Paul's insistence that grace is supreme and ontologically prior to our adoption as God's children. Engaging the intricacies of Romans, Augustine comes to see that one technically does not cry out to God, for the moment one cries out, God's preceding presence has already enabled the very cry itself. This is the "revolution" present in Augustine's exegesis of Romans: God is no longer a being alongside other actors and actresses on some parallel stage, waiting for them to reach out to him. Creatures do not "await" God, but are in fact literally nothing without God.

He admits late in life that where he wanted to defend the primacy of the human person's unaided free choice of the will, "God's grace conquered, and otherwise I would have been unable to arrive at understanding what the Apostle said with the most evident truthfulness, 'For who sets you apart? What do you possess that you have not received? But if you have received, why do you boast as though you had not received?' (1 Cor 4:7)."²⁸ Using the theology culled from Romans 7 and 9 and the insistence on receiving everything as read in 1 Corinthians 4:7, Augustine came to see how God's grace precedes any human activity. God's agency wins over ours (*sed uicit Dei gratia*), as Augustine put it, because God and the human person are not two independently acting agents. In this view, there is no human agency without God, for he alone can enact the created will to act. Paul thus enabled Augustine to stress the radical and indispensable human need for God's grace. Such a move led him to the inscrutability of God's will, on which topic he would battle Pelagius and his followers in the last days of his life on earth. Paul's voice continued to echo in Augustine's mind and service.

²⁸ Augustine, *Revisions* 2.1[28].1 (p. 110–111).

Before Augustine met Pelagius, however, he had to face the Donatists, and Paul proved pivotal in that prolonged battle as well. Recall that Emperor Diocletian's violent outbreaks against the Christians (303–311) led some ecclesiastics to collude with the Romans out of fear for their lives. Since the time of the Novatian schism—occasioned by the persecutions of Decius in 250—the Catholic Church had welcomed back these sorts of sinners after an appropriate confession and penance. But now a new group of rigorists sought similarly to sever themselves from a Church of sinners and so establish their own exclusive community of the pure. These originally Carthaginian clerics, who came to be known as “Donatists,” figured that if a presbyter was so extremely and publicly blatant as to deny the Faith, then that man had forever forfeited his God-given ability to celebrate the Church's life-giving sacraments.

In this clash, Bishop Augustine had to emphasize how God chooses sinners in order both to unite his Church and to show that it is his divine power at work and not the natural talents of ignorant sinners. Is Saul of Tarsus not the perfect example of how God works in history? Is Saul not the supreme solution to schism? In using the story of Saul, Augustine was able to achieve two interwoven ends. He could simultaneously stress not only that God uses human weakness more than human “strength,” but also that it is precisely through human brokenness that Christ is able to incorporate the vulnerable into his own body. In his seething anger, Saul is chosen by God in order that God may teach those willing to listen that it is he and not we who convert others to the Gospel of Christ:

The upshot, then, is that wills are chosen. But the will itself, unless it comes into contact with something that attracts and beckons the soul, can by no means be moved. But that it may come into contact with his [i.e., God's will] is not in a human person's power. What did Saul want to do but attack, seize, enchain and kill Christians? What a rabid, raging, blind will! Yet at a single voice from heaven he fell prostrate and, having had such an experience that his mind and will, broken by savagery, were turned and directed toward faith, he was at once transformed from a famous persecutor of the gospel to its still more famous preacher.²⁹

Against the Donatists, Augustine showcases Saul's conversion to prove that Paul was made the great Apostle not because he was perfect but because he

²⁹ Augustine, *Ad Simplicianus* (hereafter, *Simpl.*) 1.2.22, in *Responses to Miscellaneous Questions*, trans. Boniface Ramsey (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2008), 206–7. See Ambrose's *Commentary on the Psalms* 39.21.2, where he also preaches on the will of Saul being converted by the Light who was Christ on the road to Damascus.

was sinful. It is here that the brokenness of one's human condition finally allows God to act. The proud build nothing but walls, masks of so-called perfection that only divide and separate. No longer does the good will of an individual account for God's grace; in fact, there can be no good will for a child of Adam until God's grace takes hold of a fallen soul deserving only of condemnation.

The scene of Saul's conversion hence became one of the more fruitful images for Augustine's pastoral work, especially as he developed his rich notion of the Church as the *totus Christus*. This "whole Christ" is evidenced in the divine voice that Saul hears in his persecution of God's newly chosen people. It is not them that Saul persecutes; it is Christ's very self:

Now, however, I wonder if we shouldn't have a look at ourselves, if we shouldn't think about his body, because he is also us [*quia et nos ipse est*]. After all, if we weren't him, this wouldn't be true: *When you did it for one of the least of mine, you did it for me* (Matt. 25:40). If we weren't him, this wouldn't be true: *Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?* (Acts 9:4). So we too are him, because we are his organs, because we are his body, because he is our head, because the whole Christ is both head and body.³⁰

Paul yet again proves pivotal for Augustine, this time for his ecclesiology. In taking on the human condition, the incarnate Son of God not only reconciles us to the Father but also, in that very act, makes us *another himself*. The deifying theology of Augustine finds an important place in the story of Paul as recorded in Acts 9. It is a trope used over and over by Augustine to show that love identifies itself with its beloved and, when perfect love draws near, all others are thus made perfect. The result is that Christians become Christ because Christ has first made himself one with all Christians:

Let us congratulate ourselves then and give thanks for having been made not only Christians but Christ. Do you understand, brothers and sisters, the grace of God upon us; do you grasp that? Be filled with wonder, rejoice and be glad; we have been made Christ. For if he is the head, and we the members, then he and we are the whole man. . . . The fullness of Christ, then, is the head and the members. What is that, head and members? Christ and the Church.³¹

³⁰ Augustine, Sermon 133.8, trans. Edmund Hill, in *Sermons: 94A–147A* (PL 38.742).

³¹ Augustine, *Commentary on the Gospel of John* 21.8, trans. Edmund Hill (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2009), 379.

Lest we boast over such a transformation and even divinization, we must always remember that what Paul experiences—what all the elect experience—is due to nothing other than the grace of God that is given freely and not in accord with human labor or merit. This is the lesson with which Augustine would conclude his days as priest and pastor. This is the fight against the Pelagians, the Finale of Augustine's life on earth, and it is here we now turn.

The Finale

Augustine clung to Paul against the perceived threats of Pelagius and his followers throughout the latter years of his life and episcopacy. Here Augustine came to emphasize the utter depravity of the human condition: all have fallen in Adam, so all are in need of salvation from outside the *massa peccati*. Here Paul again provides Augustine with imagery he needs to stress the indispensable grace of Jesus Christ: Romans 5:12 teaches him that, because of the corporate identity of all in Adam, all have sinned, and 1 Corinthians 15:22 likewise provides him with the communal dimension of the human race. Whereas all have fallen in the one man Adam, all are now saved in the New Adam, Jesus Christ.

Where Paul proved especially poignant in these final years of Augustine's life was the deepening of the insight he first raised decades earlier: to enjoy real freedom (*libertas*) is the graced effect of allowing one's free will (*liberum arbitrium*) to be enacted rightly. Or, to employ another clever Augustinian wordplay, a child of Adam is truly free (*liberum*) only once he or she has been freed (*liberatum*) by the grace of the God.³² While both the emancipating power of grace and the contrary imprisoning power of sin were distinctions Augustine had long known (theologically and personally), it is in his battle with the Pelagians that these comes to the fore. In the words of Gerald Bonner, "Nothing marks [Augustine] off more sharply from the Pelagians than the recognition of the fact that to have free will is not the same as to be free. . . . Under the action of Divine Grace, the will remains its own master. It can accept or refuse the call of God, though it cannot in so doing defeat his ends. Man has a part to play in the action of the divine Grace, since he is not an insensate object or an animal lacking the use of reason, but a rational creature with a will of his own."³³

A British monk, Pelagius found himself fleeing Alaric's Sack of Rome in 410, landing on the shores of North Africa. He came to learn of Augustine's insistence on grace and set off to protect the freedom of the individual from what he saw as a supreme violation of the human person's ability to choose without constraint, however divine. If one asked Pelagius what motivated

³² Augustine, *De correptione et gratia* 13.42 (PL 44:942).

³³ Gerald Bonner, *St. Augustine of Hippo: Life and Controversies* (Norwich, UK: Canterbury Press, 1986), 385–86.

him to stress human autonomy to such a noticeable degree, he would have responded that he was out to save Christian asceticism from Manichean determinism, a residue he detected in Augustine's theology of grace. When asked what Pelagius was up to, Augustine responded that Pelagius found reliance upon God too limiting and the need for every human soul to receive grace to do any salvific good too demeaning. Augustine thus accused Pelagius of making the human person an agent able to reach out to the divine on his or her own natural powers, seeing in Adam merely a poor moral exemplar, but not someone in whom all fell as well.

It is in this way that the Pelagian struggle consumed Augustine's final years, refining his reading of St. Paul, especially how to understand rightly the central chapters of Romans. As illuminating as Augustine's comments on Paul's theological tenets are, this is where he also finds his strongest critics, accused by many as having gotten Paul wrong in a far-reaching error that damaged the West for a very long time. For the critics of Augustine point to his late reading of Paul as the critical juncture that set Western theology off on a path that stressed only human depravity, a reading that would make Augustine a mere penologist responsible for the pessimism of Latin theology, as compared to the perceived brightness of the Greek Fathers.³⁴ In particular, it is Augustine's reading of Romans 5:12 from Ambrosiaster's Latin text that enforced his position against the Pelagians that the entire human race sinned in or through Adam, and not simply because of Adam's example.³⁵

Given his lifelong stress on the common and universal identity of the human race, Augustine saw in Romans 5 the teaching that every human person was present in Adam, meaning that each of us is somehow responsible in Adam as well. Julian of Eclanum († 455), whom Augustine accused of being an unquestioning follower of Pelagius, returned to the Greek to challenge Augustine's Latin here. Whereas the Apostle's Greek originally read ἐφ' ᾧ³⁶ πάντες ἥμαρτον (*eph hō pantes hēmarton*—Rom 5:12), Augustine's Latin had *in quo*, "in whom," for ἐφ' ᾧ (*eph hō*), thus referring to Adam, the one in whom

³⁴ This contrast has been well rehearsed. See, for example, the introduction of my *The One Christ: Augustine's Theology of Deification* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2013), xi–xx.

³⁵ Much has been written on this interpretation. For representative studies, see Gerald Bonner, "Augustine on Romans 5:12," in *Studia Evangelica*, vols. 4–5: *Papers presented to the Third International Congress of New Testament Studies at Christ Church, Oxford*, ed. F. L. Cross (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1968), 242–47; David Weaver, "From Paul to Augustine: Romans 5:12 in Early Christian Exegesis," *Saint Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 27, no. 3 (1983): 187–206. For Augustine's use of Ambrosiaster here, see an early study by Ernesto Bonaiuti, "Genesis of Augustine's Idea of Original Sin," *Harvard Theological Review* 10, no. 2 (1917): 159–75.

³⁶ Here the Greek phrase ἐφ' ᾧ (*eph hō*) could be understood as "in whom," "by which," or "in as much as."

all have personally sinned (*peccauerunt*). While Augustine's Latin translation (*in quo*) is neither linguistically nor syntactically wrong, Julian nonetheless claimed that Augustine's Latin prejudiced the text by connecting the relative personal pronoun $\tilde{\omega}$ (*hō*) back to the man Adam instead of back to the death *by which* ($\epsilon\phi' \tilde{\omega}$ [*eph hō*]) all have come to realize their sin. Augustine responded:

For so it was that through one man sin entered the world, and through sin death, and in that way it was passed on to all human beings, in whom [*in quo*] all have sinned (Rom 5:12). Through the bad will of that one man all sinned in him, when all were that one man, and on that account each individual contracted from him original sin.³⁷

So, whereas the Pelagian "side" argued that Paul's intention was to view mortality as that which occurs *in as much as* or *because* the children of Adam have sinned, the influential reading of the Augustinian "side" rendered Adam's sin not only an exemplary dimension of the human family but also a causal one. Sin is therefore not just *original* with Adam, but is now the sin of everyman, the one sin that suffices to cast all humans into hell—the *massa peccati* straightforwardly becoming the *massa damnata*. Augustine accordingly points to the Church's ancient tradition of baptizing infants who, in his view, must have contracted sin even before they are able to choose and speak and act. This accordingly accounts for the war alive in Paul's own self (Rom 7:23), the war in each of us who have acted so as to deserve a nature that is "wounded, injured, beaten, ruined, . . . in need of a true confession, not of a false defense."³⁸

Many other attendant and important issues make up Augustine's fear of Pelagian theology, and many other concerns occupy his later years. But through all of his final output stands the mind and the missives of St. Paul. Augustine was never really without him. Paul provided the schematic structures in which the bishop of Hippo strove to think, write, and preach. In many ways we stand here having come "full circle": just as Bishop Augustine began his new life explaining some obscure passages in Romans to an elderly saint up in Milan, so he finishes his life explaining Paul once again. But this time

³⁷ Augustine, *De nuptiis et concupiscentia* 2.5.15, in *Answer to the Pelagians II*, trans. Roland Teske (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1998), 61. This treatise (*On Marriage and Desire*) is Augustine's account of Pelagius's condemnation to an imperial official, Valerius, in Ravenna around 419–420. This is the book that somehow ended up in Julian of Eclanum's hands and that set off the voluminous exchange between Augustine and Julian in the decade to follow. For Augustine's own admittance of his Greek abilities, see his Epistle 59. It surprises those who remember only his admittance at not liking Greek (*Conf.* 1.13.20) that he did in fact understand the discrepancy between the original Greek and the Latin he had before him (*Revisions* 2.12.39) and complained that a better Latin version was needed (*De doctrina christiana* 2.11.16).

³⁸ Augustine, *De natura et gratia* 53.62 (CSEL 60:279).

the stage is much larger and those listening are more prominent: councils are called, names are condemned, and a split in how to understand the Apostle rightly marks much of the early- to mid-fifth century. Augustine was insistent that he knew Paul and was being faithful to his theology, insistent that the entire Christian story must be held together by the two opposing “heads” of all human persons: all sinning in Adam, and therefore all saved in Christ. If not, Adam becomes merely a malevolent model, and Christ just one more moral exemplar among others. Augustine first came to this position while meditating on a passage of St. Paul the Apostle,³⁹ and for the next four decades he continuously turned to Paul in every circumstance and theological conundrum: to present the story of Christianity in the most intelligent and alluring way possible.

Conclusions

If Augustine of Hippo is the Doctor of Grace, it is only because he first completed residency under the great physician, Saint Paul. As we have seen, the first errors Augustine had to resolve resided in his own soul. As a student, he saw in Paul a certain dishonorableness, especially when juxtaposed with the great authors of Rome. While Augustine was a Manichaean, Paul even confirmed him in his nine-year detour with those makers of myth, especially in those passages where Paul emphasizes the old versus the new man, the groanings of creation, and particularly the liberation from material restraints. Yet, as he was drawn further out of such errors, Augustine admitted that both Ephesians 4:22–24 and Colossians 3:9–10 helped him to work out a new anthropology that extradited him from this dualism of the Manicheans.⁴⁰

Neoplatonism helped to lift Augustine out of the dualism and the deprecation of matter he found in his immature search into the problem of evil. With Plotinus, evil was no longer a matter of corporeality or some *summum malum*, but the division inherent in individuality. Furthermore, the *libros Platoniorum* taught Augustine that not all reality had to be material and that the soul and other spiritual substances exist that cannot be sensually measured. However, with this philosophical journey came the ascent of the wise man, a journey of “the alone to the alone”⁴¹ that surely appealed to the sagacious Augustine early on. But with Paul he came to realize the utter inability of a fallen creature to save him or herself: “For [Paul] does not want anyone to think that one can come to faith by the merits of works, since faith

³⁹ Augustine, *Conf.* 8.11.29.

⁴⁰ Augustine, *Conf.* 8.5.10.

⁴¹ This of course is the famous final line of Plotinus, *Enneads* 6.9.9: φυγὴ μόνου πρὸς μόνον (*phygē monou pros monon*).

is the beginning from which good works arise."⁴² No philosophy or moral perfection can save, and it is Paul who forced Augustine to realize deeply the need for divine assistance, for grace.

With Paul, Augustine also came to realize that "the letter kills, but the spirit gives life" (2 Cor 3:6)⁴³ and that this same Spirit is the very author of this Christian story. In fact this Spirit is not only the voice of both the Jewish and Christian books, the one author of both testaments;⁴⁴ he is also the Love poured into our hearts in Romans 5:5, Augustine's most-quoted Scripture passage.⁴⁵ Love demands that we allow ourselves to be emptied of self-assurance and paradoxically find in that weakness Christ's strength. Paul's transformation *en route* to Damascus illustrates that God is not a Donatist, but rather use the sins of his people to draw them even closer to himself: "The Apostle Paul says, *Brothers, I do not consider that I have obtained it*. He says himself, *Not that I have received it, or have already been made perfect* (Phil 2:13, 12). And can any human being at all dare pride himself on perfection? Rather, let us confess how imperfect we are, in order to deserve to be made perfection."⁴⁶ Paul may not be the cause of perfection, but he certainly became its courier.

Such weakness-made-perfect was one of the three reasons Christianity transformed the Roman world as quickly and as convincingly as it did. The first "incredible thing" (*incredibile est*) was, of course, the God who came to earth and lived and died as one of us and rose again in order to defeat all death, the second was that so many learned pagans came to assent to something so incredible, and the third was that a "few obscure men" (*homines ignobiles*) were so successful in transmitting that message.⁴⁷ One of these obscure and ignoble men was Saul of Tarsus, converted into the Apostle Paul by the grace of God and nothing else. It was this sinner-turned-saint who spoke to Augustine most often and most thoroughly. Never was Augustine without Paul; never was Paul absent from how the Doctor of Grace formed his message and manner of approach. Paul was with Augustine as he grew up in the Christianizing hopes of Monica and in the shadows as he grew to love the literary arts, and Paul began to call more loudly through the voice of Ambrose and then finally found a place in Augustine's life in a Milanese garden. Thereafter Paul became his constant companion and, so posterity maintains, at times, even his combatant.

⁴² Augustine, *De gestis Pelagii* 11.35, in *Answer to the Pelagians I*, trans. Roland Teske (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1997), 359.

⁴³ Augustine, *Conf.* 5.14.24; 6.4.6 (CSEL 90:34–35).

⁴⁴ Augustine, *De moribus Ecclesiae Catholicae et de moribus Manichaeorum* 1.17.30.

⁴⁵ According to Anne-Marie La Bonnardière, Rom 5:5 appears well over 200 times in Augustine's writings ("Le verset paulinien Rom., v.5 dans l'œuvre de saint Augustin," *Augustinus Magister* 2 [1954]: 657–65).

⁴⁶ Augustine, *Sermon* 142.14 (p. 423).

⁴⁷ Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 22.5 (p. 501).

The layers of the Pauline epistles continued to call Augustine into a deeper engagement and attunement. These words allowed Augustine to confirm the goodness of creation; they situated his sinful struggles not in a hostile deity but in a will divided against itself. Paul showed Augustine and his students the essential role of grace not only in healing that division but in the believer being incorporated into Christ himself. This is the nature of love: to transform the beloved into the Lover. And this was St. Paul's gift to Augustine: to provide him with the truth to know the free and formative love of God, and to know how the wisdom of the world pales infinitely against even the ignobility of Christ and an obscure few of his men.

