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# The Gospel According to Augustine: Augustine's Use of the Gospels in the *Confessions*

*Nikki Goodrick*

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St. Augustine makes use of many predecessors and precursors throughout his work, the *Confessions*. Among the most prominent of these predecessors are the writings of the early Christian church, in particular the Gospels. Augustine makes extensive use of the Gospels throughout his work but it is quite obvious that he does not view them to be a homogenous group but four distinctly different books. Augustine approaches each book in a markedly different manner and uses them for distinctly different purposes in the *Confessions*. He pays special attention to the Gospel of John and from this book he derives the most spiritual significance and virtually all of his true Christology.

Most theologians, like Augustine, do not consider the four Gospels to be a homogenous unit even though they cover the same basic material: the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. The Gospels are classically divided into two categories: the Gospel of John and the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. The synoptic gospels are characterized in several different ways; each offers a similar historical synopsis of the life of Jesus with a focus on many of the same key events. None of the synoptics begin the story of Jesus' existence before his birth and all include extensive accounts of the sermons and parables told by Jesus. All focus mainly on relating events that happened, with a less prominent focus on the interpretation of those events.

The Gospel of John, while still aimed at telling the story of Jesus' life and ministry, differs significantly from the synoptic gospels in a variety of ways. John is not concerned merely with

relating historical fact but also with interpreting the significance of what happened. This gospel is an essay: a logical, progressive argument designed to prove that Jesus Christ is above all else, God. As proof of this, John relates seven different “signs,” each one illustrating a facet of Christ’s deity. Unlike the other gospels, John stresses the pre-existence of Christ before creation itself. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1, New International Version). John also avoids the recounting of Jesus’ parables, instead focusing on seemingly simple discourses with very profound imagery that help to illustrate the deity of Christ, His relationship to the Father and even the relationship between God and the soul (Hunter, 4). “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day” (John 6:44, NIV).

John takes a much more abstract approach to the task at hand and draws heavily from philosophic tradition and vocabulary. An exceptional example of this occurs in Chapter One as Jesus is repeatedly referred to as the Word, or in Greek, the *logos*. The term *logos* in Greek has a great deal of connotative significance. In stoic philosophy, the Logos was the “all-governing fire ... a rational principle...that ruled all things” (Koester, 151). It is by no means coincidental that John chose this term to introduce his one and only God. John also uses a great deal of literary and moral imagery, such as the contrasts between light and dark, that was classically a part of the Hellenistic tradition.

The Gospel of John, while still maintaining its identity as a gospel, varies significantly from its synoptic predecessors and has historically been the most favored of the four, especially by intellectuals. The renowned theologian, Martin Luther, once wrote “This is the unique, tender, genuine, chief Gospel...Should a tyrant succeed in destroying the Holy Scriptures and only a sin-

gle copy of the Epistle to the Romans and the Gospel according to John escape him, Christianity would be saved” (Lawrence, 1). Augustine seems to share this opinion in part, definitely preferring John’s presentation of Christ over the other three gospels. A careful examination of his use of the gospels, beginning with the synoptics, will demonstrate this fact.

Perhaps the most striking way in which Augustine makes use of the gospels is his complete lack of use of the Gospel of Mark. Not once in the Confessions does Augustine make any reference to Mark. There are many probable reasons for this. The Gospel of Mark focuses largely on the humanity of Christ emphasizing his compassion and often referring to Him as “Teacher.” Mark’s portrayal of God becoming a mortal man would have been extremely repulsive to one of Augustine’s chief audiences, the Manichees; a Gnostic cult that believed all flesh was evil. From this perspective, in order for God, the ultimate spiritual good, to take on flesh, he would have to become evil, an impossible scenario. Another possible strike against Mark in Augustine’s eyes is the very simple narrative style and grammar. Mark is very straightforward and factually oriented, offering little time between events for reflection, interpretation or repose. Augustine also probably considered it to be too far below his readers and himself intellectually to be of any great value. In addition to these potential drawbacks, virtually every event addressed in the Gospel of Mark appears in at least one of the other Gospels, making Augustine’s use of the work unnecessary.

As for the other synoptic gospels, Augustine uses references to Luke frequently but in a very limited fashion. Most of his references to the Gospel of Luke are to the parables told by Jesus. Augustine uses fragments of these parables to help illustrate specific points of his narration and to draw the astute reader’s

attention back to the realm of scripture. "The woman who had lost a coin searched for it by the light of a lantern, but she would never have found it unless she had remembered it" (Augustine, 224). This example from Book X, Augustine's expository on memory, is a reference to a parable told in Luke 15 and a typical example of the way he uses this gospel. Augustine has an acute fondness for Jesus' parables which probably ties into his early education as a rhetorician. One of the chief tools employed by teachers of rhetoric was the *suasoriae*, or "little story." These stories, usually taken from epic tradition, were used to illustrate moral and legal ideas. Students were encouraged to discuss the moral implications of the stories and to occasionally put on mock trials of certain characters. Jesus' parables similarly were short stories with a special emphasis on moral truth used to illustrate ideas to his followers.

Probably the most important instance in which Augustine uses Luke occurs in the *Confessions*, Book VI. Here he paraphrases Luke 7:14-15, an account of Jesus raising a widow's son from the dead, in order to illustrate the relationship between Monica and himself and the way in which Jesus would bring them together (111). For the most part, however, Augustine's use of the Gospel of Luke consists only of fleeting scraps of verse inserted into the text to reaffirm the presence of scripture in the work. The Christ Augustine finds in Luke is only a teacher who bestows great wisdom, as well an important common bond between himself and Monica.

It is unclear why Augustine uses Luke in such a limited fashion. Luke was, after all, a Greek physician carefully schooled in the Hippocratic method of investigation and observation; an intellectual after Augustine's own heart. Greek physicians were trained to gather facts by conducting extensive research and interviews of first-hand witnesses and then extrap-

olating from the data gathered the most feasible accounts of what really happened. Because of his training, Luke was a natural historian and his accuracy is considered to be very good. The Gospel of Luke is also considered to be the most well written of the gospels. "Jerome recognized this fact quite early referring to Luke as the most skilled writer of the evangelists" (Harper, 1012). This would make sense if one accepts that Luke was, indeed, an educated Greek physician.

The question of why Augustine's rejects most of Luke then is quite perplexing. He could not have rejected the book based on its grammar or accuracy. It must simply be that Augustine was not interested in history but the interpretation of events, as well as abstract versus concrete ideas, which Luke lacks. He did not find anything in this historically oriented account of Jesus' life to satiate his desire for philosophical knowledge and spiritual understanding. Augustine's interest was not simply in what happened but in the deep underlying significance of the events that took place. His desire was to know the eternal Jesus Christ, not the Christ that was constrained in the boundaries of time and mortal flesh. Augustine was searching for abstract fact and transcendent truth which the Gospel of Luke does not make its goal to explain.

Augustine's use of the Gospel of Matthew is a great deal more extensive than that of the other synoptic gospels. In some ways he uses Matthew much in the same manner he uses Luke, to incorporate brief references to scripture into his own narrative with a special emphasis on parables. On several occasions, in fact, Augustine uses verses from both Matthew and Luke interchangeably to refer to the same parable. This serves as a means of intertextualizing between the two gospels and creates a feeling of unity between them. One of these stories found in both gospels that he refers to often is the Parable of the Talents,

“This is a small matter; but he who is trustworthy over a little sum is trustworthy over a greater” (125).<sup>1</sup>

Augustine also derives a great deal of morality from Matthew, making references to Jesus’ teachings on how believers should behave. “If I had made myself a *Eunuch for the love of the kingdom of heaven*, I should have awaited your embrace with all the greater joy” (44).<sup>2</sup> He also frequently cites Matthew 22:37-39, the “greatest” commandment: “Let us love the Lord our God with all of our whole heart, our whole soul and our whole mind, and our neighbors as ourselves” (302).

Augustine puts a large emphasis on the teachings of Christ, at the same time avoiding direct references to the person of Christ. Therefore, the Christ we see him portray with these references does not appear to be a deity but a great and wise teacher; a great source of moral wisdom and nothing more. The one verse that Augustine uses from Matthew that refers directly to Jesus is verse 11:29: “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your soul.” He refers to this passage three times, all in Book VII, placing special emphasis on the idea that Jesus is “gentle and humble of heart.” Augustine’s use of this verse is also a further example of his portrayal of Jesus as a teacher, “Learn from me.” He also makes a rather perplexing reference to verse 11:25 on page 156: “For you have hidden all this from the wise and revealed it to little children.” This reference is made amidst Augustine’s profession that he has finally chosen to follow the writings of the apostle Paul instead of those of the Platonists. He is describing why the Platonists frown upon Jesus Christ; because He often seems to favor the simple minded “little children” over “the wise.”

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1. Re: Matthew 25:21 and Luke 16:10-12.

2. Re: Matthew 19:12, original emphasis.

This reference would not be troubling—it seems to make perfect sense in its context—if it was not for the fact that Augustine is notorious for using extreme care in choosing words and often piles several layers of meaning onto one small bit of writing. Verse 11:15 can easily be interpreted as saying that the knowledge of God is a “hidden” mystery, revealed only to a chosen few. This interpretation, which Augustine implies by no accident, directly links Christianity to the Gnostic mystery religions, such as Manichaeism, that were so prevalent at the time. These mystery religions were heavily embedded in the philosophic tradition and focused their attention around a body of “mystery” knowledge that could only be obtained by a chosen few through some sort of enlightenment that was often accompanied by initiation rituals. It is odd that at this key moment, the end of Book VII, while Augustine claims to be proclaiming his final conversion from Platonism to Christianity and emphasizing the superiority of Christian doctrine over Platonist teachings that he uses this reference to firmly tie Christianity back to the Platonist/Gnostic/pagan traditions he claims to be renouncing. It leaves one to wonder if it is indeed Christianity that Augustine is choosing to follow.

The rest of Augustine’s references to Matthew are considerably more orthodox but still do not deal with the person or deity of Jesus Christ. Augustine instead focuses on the nature of God the Father, and the relationship between the soul and God. One of his favorite verses, is Matthew 10:30, which he makes use of quite frequently to illustrate the omniscience of God, “But you, who ‘take every hair of our heads into reckoning’” (33). Augustine uses Matthew 6:8 in a similar fashion, “When we pray we ask for what we need, yet the Truth himself has told us: ‘Your heavenly father knows well what your needs are before you ask him’” (253).



As for the soul, Augustine also uses the words of Jesus, as recorded by Matthew, to illuminate its nature: "For 'you are the light of the world,' you are not 'put away under a bushel measure' spread throughout the world; let all men know the light" (Augustine, 377).<sup>3</sup> This reference to Matthew 5:14-15 clearly illustrates Augustine's view that the soul is dark until God illuminates it, at which time it shines on its own. This type of light and dark imagery in the relationship between the soul and God, or the Good, is again common to Gnostic religions such as Manichaeism (Filoramo, 84).

Perhaps the most significant way Augustine uses the Gospel of Matthew is his use of verses 7:7-8, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who ask, the door will be opened" (Matthew 7:7-8, NIV). Augustine only makes direct reference to this passage two times at the beginning of Book XII (281) and at the end of Book XIII (341), but both are very significant and in fact, with the minor alterations he makes in the second reference, sum up Augustine's perception of the relationship between God and the soul. The first reference on page 281 is a direct quotation of the scriptures found amidst Augustine's exegesis of Genesis 1. It is Augustine's reassurance that God has promised him understanding and that it will come eventually. "These are your promises and who need fear to be deceived when the Truth promises" (281). He continues to make brief references to the opening of doors and the finding of truth throughout the next two books. These references remind the reader, and Augustine, that God is listening and He will provide. They also seem to be Augustine's way of saying that whatever he writes must be accurate because God is giving him all of the answers.

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3. Re: Matthew 5:14-15.

Augustine continues his exegesis of Genesis, exploring how the soul comes to know God. His conclusion is that the soul can only come to God through divine intervention and the will of God; the soul must be acted upon, it cannot act alone. Hence Augustine's final reference to the passage in which he alters all of the verbs so that the only actor is God and the soul is but a passive participant. Literally translated the passage as Augustine writes it reads: "Let it be asked of Thee, sought in Thee, Knocked for at Thee; so, ever shall it be received, so shall it be found, so shall it be opened." This passage is in fact the closing of the work and leaves the reader with Augustine's ultimate ideal of the relationship between God and the soul; it is entirely dependent upon the will of God, no matter what the soul does it cannot come to God unless and until God so chooses.

Oddly enough, even this ideal which seems so very obviously Christian manages to be bound to the pagan tradition of Augustine's past. It was, after all, Augustine's belief that his soul was not personally responsible for the evil he committed that led him to Manichaeism in the first place where the inherent goodness of the soul is a key doctrine (Brown, 51). His new "Christian" view was that only God was responsible for the soul becoming good, therefore the soul was not responsible if it was bad; God simply had not acted upon it yet. This belief and confession brings Augustine full circle; his beliefs are virtually the same as they were in the height of his departure from God to Manichaeism, the only real differences are the names of the entities involved in the soul's transformation. This is a most perplexing way for Augustine to end his *Confessions* which are supposed to be the story of his conversion to Christianity. One could argue at this point that perhaps Augustine did not convert at all, he just moved on to a different club house. The reader is left feeling unsettled and not completely certain about

Augustine's intentions in the work, especially in the light of some of his previous references to Christianity that very much tie it back to the pagan, Gnostic tradition of his earlier days.

Another major disparity in the *Confessions* is the virtual lack of Christology, or theology of Christ, which Augustine presents in the work, at least by means of his use of the synoptic gospels. This is extremely odd for a man who is telling the story of how he became a Christian. The synoptic gospels are replete with discussions and narrations on the Deity of Christ. Augustine, however, makes little or no use of Mark and Luke, and even though he uses Matthew much more extensively, he does not derive any major Christology from the book. Possible reasons for Augustine's lack of use of Mark and Luke have already been given. Matthew is very similar to these two books in many ways, but has more of a focus on the interpretation of events. Matthew was thought to be trained as some type of professional scribe and "brought out of this treasure store things new and old," drawing upon earlier traditions and contributing new insights of his own" (Mays, 951). Perhaps Augustine recognized Matthew's use of predecessors and considered his writings to be most like his own, thus explaining the considerably more lengthy and multifaceted way in which Augustine used the book in relation to the other synoptic Gospels. This still does not explain Augustine's lack of Christology from the books. It must simply be that none of these three books took an approach to Jesus with which Augustine truly identified. Instead, he found the ideal portrayal of Christ represented in the fourth gospel, the Gospel of John.

As was previously discussed, John varies significantly from the first three gospels. John is more abstract with a much greater tie to the philosophic tradition. It is the "most Hellenistic and least Jewish of the Gospels" (Mays, 1045). All of these things serve to make John more closely identifiable to Augustine than

the other Gospels. Augustine admits on several instances in the *Confessions* his love for Platonist philosophy which John borrows from and resembles extensively. Also, his educational background would have made Augustine well aware of John's use of word "games"; John often uses very simple vocabulary with a strong emphasis on connotative rather than denotative word meaning. Augustine would have respected John's mastery of the Greek language (although he claims to despise Greek) and commended him on the amount of meaning he was able to cram into such a simple text.

John's portrayal of Jesus is also considerably different than the other gospels. In John's gospel, Jesus is first introduced as the *logos*, or Word, and throughout the book is very much portrayed as being God in the form of man as opposed to a man with God-like qualities. The emphasis in John is on deity: how Christ proved his deity through the working of miracles and the fact that Jesus existed before creation.

It is also John's focus on Christ's role in creation that helps to draw Augustine's favor. John Chapter One begins "In the beginning..." in exactly the same manner as Genesis 1:1, creating a strong resonance between the New and Old Testament books. Augustine draws upon this resonance heavily in Book XII and XIII, his exegesis of Genesis 1, and strongly emphasizes the preincarnate existence and work of Jesus Christ. Augustine's interpretation of the person of Christ is much less focused on how Jesus is a separate, distinct personality within the trinity and more focused on how he is part of The One: the ultimate, infinite spiritual God. Augustine tries to focus mainly on the spiritual nature of Christ as opposed to his human nature while he was on earth. Virtually none of Augustine's references to Jesus are to his finite life and work but to his infinite spiritual presence. He virtually ignores Christ's death on the cross even though this

one physical event is the fundamental cornerstone on which Christianity is built. The references Augustine does make to Christ's incarnate work are to his teachings, thus the picture we get of Jesus the teacher as Augustine portrays him through his use of the synoptic gospels, Matthew and Luke.

Augustine's use of John varies significantly from his use of the other gospels and the Christ he portrays through John is most definitely not the humble, mortal teacher that we have seen before but an infinite spiritual being, God in all his glory. Augustine rarely uses fragments of Jesus' speech in the midst of his own writing as he did with the other gospels. This is in large part due to the fact that John does not record the parables of Jesus or any of his major sermons, giving Augustine less material to work with. It is also because, through the work of John, Augustine is trying to paint a different picture of Christ than that which he has already outlined. Augustine attempts to portray a Jesus that transcends mere human understanding and is far removed from the mortal and humble son of a carpenter.

Through John, Augustine focuses on the spiritual nature of Christ and His deity. One of his favorite tools for doing this is John 1:1-14 which begins "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God (John 1:1, NIV)." Augustine draws extensively from this chapter throughout the *Confessions*, especially in Books XII and XIII, his exegesis on Genesis. It is here, in John 1, that Augustine truly finds his savior. This is the Jesus Christ that his soul has yearned for, the Logos, the Light, the Truth and the Way. When Augustine talks about Jesus, he often does so in these terms. "Our Life himself came down into this world and took away our death...he, through whom the world was made was in the world" (82).<sup>4</sup> "What a great act it was to show mankind the way of humility

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4. Re: John 1:10, original emphasis.

when the Word was made flesh and came to dwell among the men of this world” (144).<sup>5</sup> “Let me listen to Truth, the Light of my heart” (286). “We might have thought that your Word was far distant from union with man, and so we might have despaired of ourselves, if he had not been made flesh and come to dwell among us” (251).<sup>6</sup>

Augustine is very fond of the imagery of Christ put forth by John. He places special emphasis on light and dark imagery, helping to illustrate the soul’s illumination by Christ. He uses this frequently in Books XII and XIII, making innumerable references to Jesus as the light moving over the water or the light that shone in the world. Augustine uses John so much during his exegesis of Genesis because of the special way in which the two books resonate both in their respective beginnings and in the way John portrays Jesus as creator.

Augustine only speaks of the nature of Jesus in great length four times in the *Confessions* and in each of these passages he draws most heavily upon the Gospel of John. The most significant of these flurries of Christology offered by Augustine occurs in Book X on pages 250-1. Here he offers his most lengthy and complete discourse on who Jesus is and why he is important. Augustine focuses on Christ’s role as the “mediator” between God and man, as well as his Deity. “For as man, he is our Mediator; but as the Word of God, he is not an intermediary between God and man because he is equal with God, and God with God, and together with him one God” (251). Here Augustine is drawing heavily upon John 1:1, “and the Word was with God and the Word was God.”

Augustine reveals in this passage the great duality of his view of Christ, which we have already seen in his use of the other

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5. Re: John 1:14, original emphasis.

6. Original emphasis.

gospels, "As man, he is our mediator" (251). This suggests that while Jesus was on earth he traded his God-hood to become completely a man. Hence, Augustine's portrayal through the synoptic gospels of Christ as a teacher and a very wise man who could help people find God but was not actually himself God. But, "as the Word of God, he is...God," this suggests that when Christ died he once again took up his role as God. This is a very perplexing doctrine that Augustine puts forward, yet it explains much about the way in which he uses the gospels to portray Christ. Augustine seems to suggest that in the beginning Jesus was God, but when he "became flesh," he lost his God-hood temporarily and was only a man "for he was free to lay down his life and free to take it up again" (251). After his death, Christ went back about his business of being God. This is far from being orthodox Christianity which maintains that while Jesus was on earth he was both man and God, but it was probably a great deal easier to reconcile with and accept, especially for someone of Augustine's background.

As a Manichee, Augustine firmly believed that flesh is in itself evil, while the soul is good. God can not do anything that is not good so how then could Jesus Christ become flesh? God simply could not become evil, thus leaving only two possibilities: Jesus did not truly become a man, he merely resembled man, or Jesus was not God. As a convert of Christianity, Augustine supposedly renounced all of his past beliefs, but he never lets go of this idea that flesh is ultimately evil and the soul is ultimately good. This is especially obvious towards the end of Book X as Augustine describes in depth his difficulties struggling over the problem of how God could become anything but perfect and falls back onto one of the two Gnostic solutions; Jesus Christ, while he existed on earth was not God, but a highly glorified man sent from God. Augustine then adds the twist necessary for

him to be able to call himself a Christian; before and after Jesus was on earth, he was and is God.

Only someone as audacious as Augustine would try to pass this off as kosher Christian doctrine. It is, in fact, another of Augustine's refusals to part with the pagan traditions of his old life and leads one to wonder how much of his conversion is a shift in his beliefs and how much of it is merely a shift in the way he expresses them.

Augustine uses the Gospel of John to describe the Jesus Christ who was God in the beginning, became a man and resumed his Godliness after the resurrection. John is especially suited to this due to its focus on the deity of Christ, the philosophic, abstract nature of the text and the acknowledgment of the preexistence of Christ. Augustine derives a very distinct Christology from John that portrays Jesus as the Word of God who is with God, but does not deal with his life and works on earth. The Christ Augustine portrays through John is very much a God who is above humanity and the temptations of sin.

Contrary to this, the Christ that he portrays through the Gospels of Matthew and Luke is but a man, a teacher who bestows great wisdom capable of guiding the soul to God: a "mediator." Through Augustine's use of the gospels we see the duality of his beliefs about Christ. This explains the ways in which he uses the synoptic gospels differently than John and also why he focuses so much more on John, especially towards the end of the *Confessions*. Once, in Augustine's mind, the soul finds God, how it got there is of little importance. Therefore, once Augustine truly knows Jesus, his role of mediator is no longer necessary and Augustine can focus on the majesty and deity of Christ, the Word, in all his splendor.

Augustine uses the gospels in many ways throughout the Confession but the most significant use of them is to portray his



dualistic view of Jesus Christ. For this reason he takes a significantly different approach to the Gospel of John than to the synoptic gospels, Matthew and Luke. Augustine actually creates two different pictures of Christ in this way; one of Jesus Christ, the Word of God who truly is God and the other of a mortal man who bestowed great wisdom about the relationship between God and the soul. All of Augustine's theology of Christ is derived from the gospel of John due to the philosophical, spiritual nature of this work with which Augustine identifies easily. The image, however, Augustine portrays of Jesus as he acted on earth is derived from the synoptic gospels whose main purpose was to relate the life and ministry of Christ on earth.

Augustine's extensive use of the gospels in his work, the *Confessions*, reveals a peculiar duality about his Christology and his view of Christianity as a whole. Every time Augustine claims to be renouncing his pagan tradition in favor of Christianity, he also finds some way of linking his new faith back to his old beliefs. Because of this the reader is left befuddled as to Augustine's intentions; is he converting to Christianity or is he molding Christianity to fit his previously held beliefs? Either way, Augustine's use of the gospels in the *Confessions* is highly significant in the work and reveals much about the author, while at the same time leaving many questions unanswered about his true intentions and beliefs.

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