

WHAT DID AUGUSTINE "CONFESS" IN HIS CONFESSIONS?

A. CRAIG TROXEL*

INTRODUCTION

It would be difficult to overestimate the extraordinary spiritual legacy of Augustine. It is extraordinary, in part, because Augustine's influence has been widely evident centuries and almost two millennia after his death. Bearing testimony to his profound impact is the fact that he has been cited so frequently by some of the brightest lights in the church's history.¹ Even today many journals, study institutes, seminars, and a plethora of monographs and articles are devoted exclusively to the Augustinian heritage. Adolf Harnack was not far amiss when he claimed that Augustine was incomparably the greatest man whom, "between St. Paul the Apostle and Luther the Reformer the Christian Church has possessed."² Augustine's astonishing prolificacy has been responsible for much of his proud heritage. However, the voluminous character of the Augustinian corpus has not been compromised with respect to quality. Perhaps no finer example exists than his *Confessions*. Long revered and universally recognized as one of the church's most prized classics in her history, the *Confessions* has enjoyed a peculiar status among all of Augustine's writings. But while few would question that this work is worthy of its high esteem, few have agreed on its meaning and purpose. The range of opinions on the *Confessions* is as diverse as the multitude of its commentators. What was Augustine's purpose in the *Confessions*? This question will guide the investigation that follows.

*A. Craig Troxel is a Ph.D. candidate at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

¹Seven pages in the Index are devoted to Augustine in one modern edition of John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (2 vols.; ed. J. T. McNeil; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) 2.1594-1601. John Owen quotes Augustine more than anyone else (and three-to-one over Calvin); cf. *The Works of John Owen* (24 vols.; ed. W. H. Goold; Edinburgh: Johnstone and Hunter, 1850-53; 16 vols.; reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965-68) 16.608-9.

²D. W. H. Arnold and C. G. Fry, "The Significance of Augustine," *Christianity Today* 31 (December 1987) 22.

I. THE LITERARY GENRE OF THE CONFESSIONS

Fundamental to discovering the purpose of the *Confessions* is its literary genre. But it is not certain that this is the optimum place to break into the "hermeneutical circle." For the question of literary genre anticipates the assessment of the substance and content of the work. Thus, methodologically, it is more helpful only to initially list the various options concerning the genre of the *Confessions* and then after further investigation return to this issue. Only then can a true assessment be made about the literary genre of the *Confessions*.

There is little disagreement that the *Confessions* represents somewhat of a literary milestone; the *Confessions* "has exercised a major influence on the literary tradition of Western Europe."³ This consensus also extends to the opinion that the *Confessions* represents somewhat of a literary novelty. That is, it marks the introduction of a new breed of autobiography. A. F. West remarked that the *Confessions* "dates the entrance of a new kind of autobiography into Latin literature—the autobiography of introspection, the self-registered record of the development of a human soul."⁴ Adolf von Harnack agreed when he said,

The significance of the "Confessions," is as great on the side of form as on that of content. Before all, they were a literary achievement. No poet, no philosopher before him undertook what he here performed; and I may add that almost a thousand years had to pass before a similar thing was done. . . for what do the "Confessions" of Augustine contain? the portrait of a soul.⁵

Yet, as G. Bonner has suggested, as much as the *Confessions* might appear "to be a model for any and every psychological autobiography which has succeeded it . . . such a classification is too simple."⁶ Observations such as these reveal the disagreement over the specific classification of Augustine's work.

Numerous labels are attributed to the *Confessions*. The work has been classified as an autobiography,⁷ a psychological

³G. Bonner, "Starting With Oneself; Spiritual Confessions: Saint Augustine's Confessions," *ExpTim* 101 (March 1990) 163.

⁴B. B. Warfield, *Studies in Tertullian and Augustine*, vol. 4 in *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1920; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991) 244.

⁵Warfield, *Studies*, 244.

⁶Bonner, "Starting With Oneself," 163.

⁷Although he uses the term "autobiography," Latourette believes the *Confessions* is "not so much narrative, although it contains it, as meditations on human nature . . ." (K. S. Latourette, *A History of Christianity*, vol. I, *Beginnings to 1500* [New York: Harper & Row, 1975] 175). Similarly, P. Brown, who wrote the definitive biography on Augustine, categorizes the *Confessions* as autobiography but in an expanded sense. He describes the work in a number of ways: "a masterpiece of strictly intellectual history," a "manifesto of the inner world," an "act of therapy," "not a book of reminiscences" but "an anxious turning to the past," and "the story of

autobiography,⁸ a confessional autobiography,⁹ an intellectual autobiography,¹⁰ a "spiritual autobiography,"¹¹ an autobiography of post-critical philosophy,¹² "an extended prayer,"¹³ a contrived "story,"¹⁴ a conversion story,¹⁵ a story of (philosophical) conversion(s),¹⁶ and a "theological treatise" or "work of edification."¹⁷ However, all of these labels could be classified in three general groups: autobiography, story, and edifying theological treatise. Thus the goal is to discern in what group, or combination of groups, the *Confessions* should be placed.

We might also think of these groups as a continuum. On one end of the continuum the subject or theme of the *Confessions* is limited only to Augustine (i.e., strict autobiography), and on the other end the subject or theme is something totally other than Augustine (i.e.,

Augustine's heart" (*Augustine of Hippo* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967] 158-81).

⁸Bonner, "Starting With Oneself," 163. Bonner claims that "such a classification is too simple" (p. 163). He intends the term "psychological" only in a general sense, and states that "the *Confessions* cannot be regarded as autobiography in the usual sense of the word" (p. 165). His helpful treatment of the *Confessions* bears out the difficulty of precipitous and narrow classifications of the *Confessions*.

⁹L. S. Cunningham, "St. Augustine: 'The Confessions,'" *Christian Century* 44 (February 1977) 166; R. Allen, "The Confessions of St. Augustine," *National Review* (January 11, 1985) 29.

¹⁰D. D. Crawford, "Intellect and Will in Augustine's Confessions," *RelS* 24 (1988) 291-302.

¹¹*The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. by J. K. Ryan (New York: Doubleday [Image Books], 1960). The cover and first page read, "The Greatest Spiritual Autobiography of All Time."

¹²M. Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964) 267.

¹³J. C. McCarthy, "Desire, Recollection and Thought: On Augustine's *Confessions* I.1," *Communio* 14 (Summer 1987) 146.

¹⁴L. Byrne, "Writing God's Story: Self and Narrative Structure in Augustine's *Confessions*," *Christianity & Literature* 38 (Spring 1989) 16. Byrne argues that the *Confessions* amounts to a "work of personal justification" (p. 15), as it really is the creating, not finding, of his "story." Byrne's interesting reading of the *Confessions* is explained, however, by one important presupposition:

In Augustine . . . each Christian is free to read, and thus to ascribe in his own life as he lives it, the "truth" of God's scripture for himself. There is no one true meaning since God's text, as it is written by human hands and as it is lived in individual lives, is as various as the selves that express it. The "truth" lies in the way each man, as Augustine demonstrates in telling his story, first finds and then tells his story. (p. 29)

Similarly, R. E. Meagher believes the key to understanding the *Confessions* is the concept of self-knowledge. Augustine's success was in his keen and honest self-awareness. Similar to Byrne's assumption, Meagher argues that Augustine saw himself "as both creator and creature, both subject and substance. His word is both his own work and the work of God. In the order of time, the question of his own word and his own work arises first" (*An Introduction to Augustine* [New York: New York University Press, 1978] 69).

¹⁵R. J. Foster, "The Good Life," *Christianity Today* 31 (December 11, 1987) 20.

¹⁶R. D. Crouse, "'In Aenigmatate Trinitas' (Confessions XIII,5,6): The Conversion of Philosophy in St. Augustine's *Confessions*," *Dionysius* 11 (December 1987) 53.

¹⁷Warfield, *Studies*, 240. Students of theology will note my dependence on Warfield's basic thesis and my use of many of his insights regarding Augustine and the *Confessions*, notwithstanding the slight refinement of Warfield's conclusions.

theological treatise). In the middle of the continuum the subject or theme would include elements of both Augustine and other ideas (i.e., story). Thus, an investigation of the content of the *Confessions* should disclose where it ought to be placed on such a continuum. But before one can make a judgment as to where the *Confessions* ought to be placed, we must first discover if Augustine himself offered any commentary on the *Confessions* which would reveal a clue regarding what type of literature it is and how it should be read.

II. EXTERNAL EVIDENCE ON THE CONFESSIONS

We have two extant references in Augustine's writings that are relevant to his understanding of the *Confessions*. In his *Retractions* (AD 426/427), which serves as a critical bibliography of his major works and is second only to the *Confessions* as an autobiographical source for his life, Augustine stated part of his purpose in writing the *Confessions*:¹⁸

The thirteen books of my *Confessions* whether they refer to my evil or good, praise the just and good God, and stimulate the heart and mind of man to approach unto Him. And, as far as pertaineth unto me, they wrought this in me when they were written, and this they work when they are read.¹⁹

Obviously Augustine viewed the *Confessions* as more than simple biography: that is to say, he did not intend for the reader to meditate exclusively upon the events of his life. Rather it was his intent for the reader to see beyond his life and "praise the just and good God." This record of his life was to be a means to an end.

Similarly, in a letter to Darius (AD 429), Augustine noted the perspective that the reader should take in reading the *Confessions*:

Accept the books of my "Confessions" which you have asked for. Behold me therein, that you may not praise me above what I am. Believe there not others about me, but me myself, and see by means of myself what I was in myself; and if there is anything in me that pleases you, praise with me there Him whom I wish to be praised for me—for that One is not myself. Because it is He that made us and not we ourselves; nay, we have destroyed ourselves, but He that made us has remade us. And when you find me there, pray for me that I be not defective but perfected.²⁰

Again, Augustine clearly desired the reader to view his life as a means for the reader to praise "him whom" he wished to be praised. These texts show that Augustine intended to give more than a conventional biographical account of his life. He is not the

¹⁸Bonner, "Starting With Oneself," 164.

¹⁹Augustine, *Retractions* 2.6.1. Quotations of Augustine's work are from *NPNF*.

²⁰*Letters* (No. 231, §6) 584.

only subject that he wanted the reader to contemplate. However, there is insufficient information here to suggest that Augustine intended something totally different than an autobiography. Thus the most one can glean from these comments is that Augustine intended the reader to focus on more than one purpose or theme. Therefore, the question regarding the literary genre of the *Confessions* is not yet answered. It would at least appear to involve more than one classification.

III. INTERNAL EVIDENCE IN THE CONFESSIONS

Moving from what Augustine stated formally to what he demonstrated materially, instances within the book where he offers commentary which directly or indirectly bears upon his purpose in the *Confessions* will be examined first. Then its issues, themes, and flow of thought will be analyzed to illuminate his meaning and purpose.

Augustine introduces into the *Confessions* many "asides" that suggest his purpose. For instance, early in the work he explains why he detailed his past dissipation:

I will now call to mind my past foulness, and the carnal corruptions of my soul, not because I love them, but that I may love Thee, O my God. For love of Thy love do I it. (2.1.1)

Augustine indicates that his account of his past sin is meant to draw attention to the love of God. Augustine is more explicit in another place:

To whom do I narrate this? . . . And to what end? That I and all who read the same may reflect out of what depths we are to cry unto Thee. For what cometh nearer to Thine ears than a confessing heart and a life of faith? (2.3.5)

Augustine does not wish the reader to focus his or her attention only upon Augustine's life, but rather on God. Augustine exemplifies the same concern elsewhere:

Accept the sacrifice of my confessions by the agency of my tongue, which Thou has formed and quickened, that it may confess to Thy name. . . . But let my soul praise Thee, that it may love Thee; and let it confess Thine own mercies to Thee, that it may praise Thee. (5.1.1)

Augustine sounds this same note at the end of the *Confessions*:

Why, therefore, do I place before Thee so many relations of Things? . . . that I may awaken my own love and that of my readers towards Thee, that we may all say, "Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised." (11.1.1)

Thus there is continuity in Augustine's stated purpose from the beginning to the end of the *Confessions*. He desired that the reader lift his eyes from the pages of Augustine's record of his life and look beyond them to the goodness and mercy of God.

This cursory presentation yields two preliminary indications about his purpose. First, Augustine's purpose in the *Confessions* is multi-faceted, going beyond the scope of a typical autobiography. Second, the *Confessions* do not fit neatly into any one type of literary genre. It is not merely autobiographical, as its author explicitly stated he had an agenda behind the narration of his life. But it is not less than autobiographical, as the narration does revolve around the pilgrimage of his life. It could also be said that the *Confessions* is a "story," as Augustine tells a tale with a certain moral end in view. Thus, a final judgment as to literary genre must be postponed until further examination of the *Confessions*.

IV. "CONFESSION" IN THE CONFESSIONS

Before examining the theme, subject, and flow of thought within the *Confessions*, it will be helpful to focus on Augustine's use of the term "confession" in the work and its title. The *Confessions* has often been categorized or type-cast on the basis of the word "confession" in the title. But it is possible to misconstrue Augustine's meaning if the use of the word within the *Confessions* is not carefully examined. What does Augustine mean by "confession"? First, it might have the "traditional" sense, a recounting or repenting of one's sin(s). This is how most commentators have understood the term—and understandably so. For Augustine often uses the word for the repentance of his sins:

For when I am wicked, to confess to Thee is naught but to be dissatisfied with myself; but when I am truly devout, it is naught but not to attribute it to myself, because Thou, O Lord, dost "bless the righteous"; but first Thou justifiest him "ungodly." My confession, therefore, O my God, in Thy sight, is made unto Thee silently, and yet not silently. For in noise it is silent, in affection it cries aloud. (10.2.2)

But yet do Thou, my most secret Physician, make clear to me what fruit I may reap by doing it. For the confessions of my past sins,—which Thou has "forgiven" and "covered," that Thou mightest make me happy in thee. (10.3.4)

Therefore do we make known unto Thee our love, in confessing unto Thee our own miseries and Thy mercies upon us, that Thou mayest free us altogether, since Thou hast begun, that we may cease to be wretched in ourselves, and that we may be blessed in Thee. . . . Behold, I have told unto Thee many things, which I could and which I would, for Thou first wouldest that I should confess unto Thee, the Lord my God, for Thou art good, since Thy "mercy endureth for ever." (11.1.1)

These examples show that Augustine does have repentance in view when he uses the term confession.

But to limit his use of "confession" to this significance would be too narrow a reading. As Bonner notes, on the basis of its title, many have approached the *Confessions* "as a penitential work, concerned with the confession of sins, which indeed it is, in some degree; but this is not Augustine's primary concern."²¹ Augustine's use of the term is broader, as the following examples illustrate:

For even when we have a knowledge of these worldly matters, it is folly to make a profession of them; but confession to Thee is piety. It was therefore with this view that this straying one spake much of these matters. (5.5.8)

I too, O Lord, also so confess unto Thee that men may hear, to whom I cannot prove whether I confess the truth, yet do they believe me whose ears charity openeth unto me. (10.3.3)

To Thee, then, O Lord, am I manifest, whatever I am, and with what fruit I may confess unto Thee I have spoken. (10.2.2)

This is the fruit of my confessions, not of what I was, but of what I am, that I may confess this not before Thee only. (10.4.6)

These texts suggest that for Augustine "confession" was broader than mere repentance, also including a creedal element. "Confession" denotes Augustine's affirmation about God, himself, and truth. However, for Augustine probably the chief use of "confession" goes beyond either penitential or creedal meanings.

Augustine also uses the term to communicate his praise and adoration of God, as these texts prove to be true:

²¹Bonner, "Starting With Oneself," 164. For an example of the *Confessions* viewed wholly as penitential, see McCarthy, "Desire, Recollection and Thought." Weighing against "confession" meaning exclusively repentance is Augustine's failure to confess his sin(s) in the manner which the reader would expect. The fact that Augustine places so much emphasis upon the pear tree incident and yet gives so little attention to his former adulterous lifestyle probably indicates that his agenda transcends the scope of mere penitence.

Accept the sacrifice of my confessions by the agency of my tongue, which Thou has formed and quickened, that it may confess to Thy name. . . . But let my soul praise Thee, that it may love Thee; and let it confess Thine own mercies to Thee, that it may praise Thee. (5.1.1)

To whom do I narrate this? . . . And to what end? That I and all who read the same may reflect out of what depths we are to cry unto Thee. For what cometh nearer to Thine ears than a confessing heart and a life of faith? (2.3.5)

O my God, let me with gratitude remember and confess unto thee Thy mercies bestowed upon me. . . . Who is like unto Thee, O Lord? "Thou hast loosed my bonds, I will offer unto Thee the sacrifice of thanksgiving." (8.1.1)

The cumulative weight of examples like these, along with the tenor of the work as a whole, has not escaped the notice of some commentators. Bonner notes that, "The *Confessions* are first and foremost a work of praise, as is made clear by the opening words, taken from Psalm 145: 'Great art Thou, O Lord, and greatly to be praised: great is Thy power, and infinite is Thy creation.'"²² Bonner thus concludes, "'Confession,' then, for Augustine, is primarily confession of praise and thanksgiving to God for his mercies. Confession of sin has its place, but in relation to God's grace and not in its own right."²³ P. Brown agrees: "*confessio* meant, for Augustine, 'accusation of oneself; praise of God.'"²⁴ This same assessment was made long ago by B. B. Warfield:

For Augustine does not use the term "Confessions" here in the debased sense . . . of unveiling, uncovering to the sight of the world what were better perhaps hidden from all eyes but God's which see all things; but in that higher double sense in which we may speak of confessing the grace of God and our humble dependence on Him, a sense compounded of mingled humility and praise.²⁵

Note also J. Ryan's comment:

Yet if the confession of sins is a principal thing in Augustine's work, it is not the only principal thing. His work is rightly called *Confessions*, in the plural. He does not merely make confession of sin in general; he makes confessions of particular, separate sins. Again, he makes not only confessions of sin, but confessions of other kinds as well. Augustine's book, in fact, is a threefold confession. It is a confession of sins, a confession of faith, and a confession of praise.²⁶

²²Bonner, "Starting With Oneself," 164.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 175.

²⁵Warfield, *Studies*, 240.

²⁶Ryan, Introduction to *The Confessions*, 29.

Augustine uses the term "confession" in a multi-faceted way to represent not just his honest repentance of sin before God but also, and more basically, his full-orbed belief in, and praise of, God and his glorious saving grace.

Thus, Augustine's use of this term "confession" coheres with the thrust of the evidence presented in this investigation thus far. Augustine's purpose in the *Confessions* goes beyond the scope of the typical autobiography. "Confession" for Augustine denotes more than repentance; it encompasses his affirmations about the living God and, most importantly, his praise and adoration of God's saving grace.²⁷ This is Augustine's deepest and richest confession. This also bears witness to what is chiefly on Augustine's mind throughout the *Confessions*.

V. THE THEME OF THE CONFESSIONS

Our investigation of the content of the *Confessions* thus far indicates that Augustine intended his book to be read in a significantly different manner than a typical autobiography. This conclusion is confirmed by many passages which direct the reader past the events of Augustine's life to a greater and more pressing idea, the greatness of God in his loving, glorious, saving grace:

I will now call to mind my past foulness, and the carnal corruptions of my soul, not because I love them, but that I may love Thee, O my God. For love of Thy love do I it. (2.1.1)

Accept the sacrifice of my confessions by the agency of my tongue, which Thou has formed and quickened, that it may confess to Thy name. . . . But let my soul praise Thee, that it may love Thee; and let it confess Thine own mercies to Thee, that it may praise Thee. (5.1.1)

But yet do Thou, my most secret Physician, make clear to me what fruit I may reap by doing it. For the confessions of my past sins,—which Thou has "forgiven" and "covered," that Thou mightest make me happy in Thee, changing my soul by faith and Thy sacrament,—when they are read and heard, stir up the heart, that it sleep not in despair and say, "I cannot;" but that it may awake in the love of Thy mercy and the sweetness of Thy grace. (10.3.4)

Why, therefore, do I place before Thee so many relations of things? . . . that I may awaken my own love and that of my readers towards Thee, that we may all say, "Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised." (11.1.1)

²⁷We do not mean to suggest that Augustine's use of "confession" for repentance is more trivial or has less status than its other meanings. This would be a twisted interpretation of repentance in the *Confessions*. One is struck by Augustine's clearly somber attitude toward the repentance of his sins. The point here is only that, for Augustine, the confession of sin is possible because of, yet pales in comparison to,

Note also that the *Confessions* begins on a note of praise, with a reference from Psalm 145.²⁸

The theme of God's grace is prevalent throughout the *Confessions*; but this is not in itself sufficient to prove that it is the primary or main theme.²⁹ Only an examination of the structure, direction, and conclusion of the main argument can take us further.

The general flow of thought in the first ten books of the *Confessions* corresponds mostly to Augustine's narration of his life. In them Augustine chronicles his long pilgrimage to find the Truth, or rather being found by the merciful God. It is the story of his journey to conversion.³⁰ However, while his account climaxes in his conversion (Book 8), the *Confessions* also includes many reflections on events and thoughts after his conversion. Especially is this so in the more theological and philosophical books (11-13), an exposition of the early chapters of the creation narrative in Genesis 1. Still, the weightiest portion of the *Confessions* is Augustine's

God's glorious grace. Augustine's ultimate goal is not just to confess his sins, but to confess faith in the God who will forgive them.

²⁸See above; Bonner, "Starting With Oneself," 164. Bonner has also noted that Augustine's own division of the work into two sections (Books 1-10 & Books 11-13—see *Retractions* 2.6.1) causes each section to begin on a note of praise. As he began Book 1 with Psalm 145, he opens Book 11 with it also (11.6.14). The significance of this should not be lost on the student of biblical theology. One is struck by the psalmodic character of the *Confessions*, not only in their content, but in genre also. It is also plausible to consider the personal narratives of Paul (e.g., Romans 7; 2 Corinthians 4, 12; Galatians 1, 2; Philippians 3; etc.), as possible influences on Augustine. These influences would lend credence to the contention that the choice of God *or* Augustine, as subject, is a false dichotomy. (I am indebted to Dr. S. B. Ferguson for these helpful insights.)

²⁹M. Cleary asserts that "grace" in Augustine, especially as exhibited in the *Confessions*, is a bestowed love in relationships. Augustine's experience of grace was an experience of love in the context of a (bereaved) friendship, and the decision of the will from then on to live out such love. It is not divinely given. See his "Augustine, Affectivity and Transforming Grace," *Theology* 93 (May-June 1990) 210. Similarly, Crawford sees Augustine's conversion as a radical reorientation of the will in attitude and motive. Augustine believed that God brought him toward his goal, but this "divine initiative" is presupposed and conditioned by Augustine's own will (Crawford, "Intellect and Will," 302). Both miss Augustine's point on describing his misery and unhappiness—his emphasis upon grace as beyond human contrivance. It certainly cannot be trivialized to the level of a mere "loving" attitude. It is a gift which is divinely purchased and divinely given.

³⁰Augustine's pilgrimage is summarized well by M. Marshall:

Augustine journeyed inwardly a good deal further than ever he could outwardly . . . struggling on the longest journey in the world—the journey from head to heart and from heart to will . . . bringing Augustine to that point of breakdown, to that most blessed of moments for anyone, when breakdown becomes breakthrough and when the crisis is resolved not so much by surrender as by transcendence. (*The Restless Heart: The Life and Influence of St. Augustine* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987] 57)

Foster has made a perceptive insight regarding Augustine's pilgrimage:

It was a great moment, but to understand Augustine's conversion rightly, we must first realize it did not happen in a vacuum. There was a very long, intricate, and often arduous path that led up to it. And we, today, in our preoccupation with the crisis of conversion, often forget the importance of the pilgrimage that precedes and follows conversions." ("The Good Life," 20)

spiritual journey up to and including conversion. Perhaps the best way to summarize this account of his spiritual journey is by means of the well-known passage which appears conspicuously early in the book: "For Thou hast formed us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in Thee."³¹ Augustine's account of his spiritual pilgrimage is the retelling of the time when his "heart was restless" and how it ultimately found its rest in the God of mercy who had his "hand" at work in Augustine's life all along. Several key passages attest the accuracy of this general outline of the *Confessions*.

"Our hearts are restless . . . "

Augustine describes his life before his conversion as a gradual growth in his soul's misery and unhappiness. His restless heart could not find happiness or rest without God, despite the fact that he was enjoying vocational advancement and success.

"Supposing us to be immortal, and to be living in the enjoyment of perpetual bodily pleasure, and that without any fear of losing it, why, then, should we not be happy, or why should we search for anything else?"—not knowing that even this very thing was a part of my great misery, that, being thus sunk and blinded, I could not discern that light of honour and beauty to be embraced for its own sake, which cannot be seen by the eye of the flesh, it being visible only to the inner man. (6.16.26)

Thus doth the soul commit fornication when she turns away from Thee, and seeks without Thee what she cannot find pure and untainted until she returns to Thee. Thus all pervertedly imitate Thee who separate themselves far from Thee and raise themselves up against Thee. But even by thus imitating Thee they acknowledge Thee to be the Creator of all nature, and so that there is no place whither they can altogether retire from Thee. (2.6.14)

His life sunken in dissipation, Augustine reflected upon sin with penetrating insight into its pernicious nature. He also reflected on how aimless and capriciously deceptive movement toward evil can be, as the idolatrous imitation of God and a pseudo-reality.

Behold my heart, O my God; behold my heart, which Thou hadst pity upon when in the bottomless pit. Behold, now, let my heart tell Thee what it was seeking there, that I should be gratuitously wanton, having no inducement to evil but the evil itself. It was foul, and I

³¹*Confessions* 1.1. P. Schaff distinguished this phrase as, ". . . the finest sentence in the whole book, and furnishes one of the best arguments for Christianity as the only religion which leads to that rest in God" (*NPNF* 1.45).

loved it. I loved to perish. I loved my own error—not that for which I erred, but the error itself. Base soul, falling from Thy firmament to utter destruction—not seeking aught through the shame but the shame itself! (2.4.9)

Thus doth the soul commit fornication when she turns away from Thee, and seeks without Thee what she cannot find pure and untainted until she returns to Thee. Thus all pervertedly imitate Thee who separate themselves far from Thee and raise themselves up against Thee. But even by thus imitating Thee they acknowledge Thee to be the Creator of all nature, and so that there is no place whither they can altogether retire from Thee. (2.6.14)

Augustine even recounts a “confession” that reveals the subtlety of his sin and the depth of his love for evil:

“Grant me chastity and continency, but not yet.” For I was afraid lest Thou shouldest hear me soon, and soon deliver me from the disease of concupiscence, which I desired to have satisfied rather than extinguished. (8.7.17)

Wallowing in his meaningless and miserable existence, he described how God mercifully allowed him to see his sin for what it was; and thus he came to loathe his burdensome iniquity:

But Thou, O Lord, whilst he was speaking, didst turn me towards myself, taking me from behind my back, where I had placed myself while unwilling to exercise self-scrutiny; and Thou didst set me face to face with myself, that I might behold how foul I was, and how crooked and sordid, bespotted and ulcerous. And I beheld and loathed myself; and whither to fly from myself I discovered not. . . . and Thou again opposedst me unto myself, and thrustedst me before my own eyes, that I might discover my iniquity, and hate it. (8.7.16)

With such knowledge he was torn with strife:

But I was mad that I might be whole, and dying that I might have life, knowing what evil thing I was, but not knowing what good thing I was shortly to become. (8.8.19)

What was Augustine to do? Although he had become increasingly convinced of the truthfulness of the Christian faith, he was still not truly within its bounds. His heart remained restless and in utter agony cried out to the God of mercy, as Augustine recounts in that famous conversion scene under a fig tree in the garden:

But Thou, O Lord how long? How long, Lord? Wilt Thou be angry for ever? Oh, remember not against us former iniquities; for I felt that I was enthralled by them. I sent up these sorrowful cries,—How long, how long? Tomorrow and to-morrow? Why not now? Why is there not this hour and end to my uncleanness? (8.12.28)

" . . . Till they find their rest . . ."

Augustine was converted in that garden in Milan after hearing something akin to a child's voice say to him "take up and read" the Scriptures. He read Rom 13:13, 14 and his heart finally found its rest:

No further would I read, nor did I need; for instantly, as the sentence ended,—by a light, as it were, of security infused into my heart,—all the gloom of doubt vanished away. (8.12.29)

Augustine described the newfound happiness of his soul:

And the happy life is this,—to rejoice unto Thee, in thee, and for Thee; this it is, and there is no other. (10.22.32)

And so I did the more abundantly weep at the singing of Thy hymns, formerly panting for Thee, and at last breathing in Thee, as far as the air can play in this house of grass. (9.7.16)

Finally, Augustine could rest in the joy, not merely the knowledge of the truth:

For a happy life is joy in the truth. For this is joy in Thee, who art "the truth," O God, "my light." (10.23.33)

" . . . in Thee"

But rest for Augustine's heart was not found in naked truth. His heart had found its rest in "Thee," the God of mercy and grace:

Unto Thee be praise, unto Thee be glory, O Fountain of mercies! I became more wretched, and Thou nearer. Thy right hand was ever ready to pluck me out of the mire, and to cleanse me, but I was ignorant of it. (6.16.26)

Late have I loved you, O Beauty so ancient and so new; late have I loved you! . . . You called me and cried to me and broke upon my deafness; you sent forth your beams and shone upon me and chased away my blindness; you breathed your fragrance upon me, and I drew in my breath and now I pant for you; I tasted you, and now I hunger and thirst for you; you touched me, and I burn for your peace. (10.27.38)

Thou hast loosed my bonds. (9.1.1)

This God of mercy and grace was where Augustine's heart could find rest, because he was the sovereign God who was at work in his life all along, guarding and leading his heart to its resting point.³²

These things I meditated upon, and Thou wert with me; I sighed, and Thou heardest me; I vacillated, and Thou didst guide me; I roamed through the broad way of the world, and Thou didst not desert me. (6.5.8)

Unto Thee be praise, unto Thee be glory, O Fountain of mercies! I became more wretched, and Thou nearer. Thy right hand was ever ready to pluck me out of the mire, and to cleanse me, but I was ignorant of it. (6.16.26)

O my God, let me with gratitude remember and confess unto Thee Thy mercies bestowed upon me. . . . "Thou hast loosed my bonds." . . . And how Thou hast loosed them I will declare. (8.1.1)

This brief outline is not detailed, but it is sufficiently comprehensive to illustrate the general direction of Augustine's thought.³³ His interpretive narration of his life's spiritual pilgrimage reflects a concerted purpose which affirms what has been suggested thus far. Augustine's external comments, his use of the term "confession" itself, and the flow of thought within the book indicate that the underlying and ubiquitous theme of the *Confessions* is the praise of God and his saving grace. Thus, Warfield rightly contended that God's goodness, not Augustine's life, was the central theme of the *Confessions*:

For it is the very purpose of this book to give the impression that Augustine himself was a weak and erring sinner, and that all of good that came into his life was of God. . . . this whole account of his life-history . . . up to its crisis in his conversion is written . . . not that we may know Augustine, but that we may know God: and it shows us Augustine only that we may see God. The seeking and saving grace of God is the fundamental theme throughout.³⁴

Yet before any final conclusions can be drawn regarding the literary genre of the *Confessions* and Augustine's purpose, it is necessary to address the issue of the subject of the *Confessions*.

³²For Augustine, salvation is totally the unmerited gift of God. L. D. Sharp, "The Doctrines of Grace in Calvin and Augustine," *EvQ* 52 (1980) 87. See also J. P. Burns, *The Development of Augustine's Doctrine of Operative Grace* (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1980) 178-80.

³³Noticeably absent is the intellectual dimension to Augustine's pilgrimage with its particular obstacles and issues. Also absent is an explanation of the last three books of biblical commentary and theological-philosophical discussion.

³⁴Warfield, *Studies*, 267. This is precisely why Warfield believed the closest analogy to the *Confessions* is John Bunyan's *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, which also has the purpose of glorifying the grace of God (*ibid.*, 241).

VI. THE SUBJECT OF THE CONFESSIONS

One might think that the subject is either identical to the theme or so closely related that there is little or no need to discuss the issue. This is the opinion of some:

It is, however, God who of necessity dominates the dialogue; and it is for this reason that the *Confessions* cannot be regarded as autobiography in the usual sense of the word. In an autobiography, the narrator is the dominant figure. In the *Confessions*, the dominant figure is God.³⁵

From such passages as these we perceive how Augustine uniformly thought of his "Confessions"—not as a biography of himself, but, as we have commended a rather blind commentator for seeing, rather as a book of edification, or, if you will, a theological treatise. His actual subject is not himself, but the goodness of God; and he introduces his own experiences only as the most lively of illustrations of the dealings of God with the human soul as He makes it restless until it finds its rest in Him.³⁶

In principle one can hardly disagree with such analyses. There is little doubt about what Augustine intended his readers to focus upon.

But as to formal distinctions, perhaps Bonner and Warfield are slightly overstating the case in terms of the "proper subject" of the *Confessions*. The subject of the *Confessions* can rightly be said to be either Augustine or the goodness of God's grace, depending upon how one views the work. It might be helpful to think of a theoretical distinction between the more immediate subject, and the more distant subject. Augustine is clearly the more immediate proper subject, as the *Confessions* does chronicle *his* life, *his* pilgrimage, and *his* conversion. Thus, the *Confessions* can be rightly considered as a sort of autobiography. But as we have seen, the more distant subject is God, not Augustine. The underlying theme in the *Confessions* is God's grace. The ultimate subject, God, shines through the story, as Augustine continually reiterates the underlying theme. There is no question that Augustine, as the immediate subject of the story, is overshadowed by the dominant underlying theme, the goodness of God's grace, and ultimately by the subject he wished all praise to go to, God himself. But this assessment is made within the boundaries that Augustine explicitly established within the work. That is, Augustine's life should be understood as a means to the end of praising God for his goodness. Therefore, both Augustine and God are the proper subjects

³⁵Bonner, "Starting With Oneself," 165.

³⁶Warfield, *Studies*, 239-40.

of the *Confessions*, the former the immediate subject, the latter the chief subject of the story's underlying theme.

VII. FINAL ASSESSMENTS

We have gathered evidence that should facilitate a keener appreciation for Augustine's purpose in the *Confessions*. But it has also revealed that precise classification is not possible. For instance, Augustine's various comments within and without the *Confessions* exhibit a conscious interest on his part to draw attention to God and his saving grace. As is exemplified by his use of "confession" and his constant reference to God's grace, Augustine's purpose is not that of the typical autobiography. The events in his life become the means to lead the reader in praise of the providential and merciful work of God.

In terms of literary genre, it is easier to ascertain what the *Confessions* is not than to determine what it is. The *Confessions* cannot be placed into any one of the three of the categories listed earlier (i.e., autobiography, story, edifying theological treatise). Thinking in terms of the continuum is helpful at this point. Locating the *Confessions* at one end—strict autobiography—or the other— theological treatise—would sacrifice important elements in the *Confessions*. The fact that Augustine is the proper immediate subject means that the *Confessions* do qualify as some sort of autobiography and cannot rightly be considered a theological treatise. Yet, the *Confessions* can hardly be considered an autobiography in the ordinary sense, as Augustine has written with such a weighty and multifaceted agenda in mind. As appealing as a compromise between these extremes might be by classifying the *Confessions* as "story" only, this too does injustice to the other elements.³⁷

The *Confessions* incorporates elements from all three groups; it cannot be forced it into any one literary style. Surely one of the reasons that the *Confessions* is considered such an enduring masterpiece is precisely because it is so difficult to "pigeon-hole" or stereotype. However, even as we praise the broad literary scope of the *Confessions*, it is important to make some vital qualifications which are germane to the more central task of this study.

³⁷It is difficult to critique views which see Augustine's motivation for writing the *Confessions* as pedagogical (i.e., as a "moral story"). For example, W. Walker has stated that in writing the *Confessions* Augustine "retrospectively treats his own spiritual pilgrimage and conversion as a clue to, and an illustration of, the universal situation of human beings in relation to God" (*A History of the Christian Church* [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1985] 201). The difficulty is that it contains an element of truth. Augustine himself stated that he knew the testimony of his spiritual pilgrimage was edifying for others and he rejoiced that this was the case. But to say that it was specifically his motivation to offer it as an illustration of humankind before God lacks explicit documentation.

Formal categories are not as crucial to a proper understanding of the *Confessions* as is one's appreciation for Augustine's purpose. One fruit of this investigation has been to expose the fallacy of typecasting the literary genre of the *Confessions* before one investigates the substance and material of the book. Its content must determine its categorization. Yet many have misconstrued Augustine's purpose in the *Confessions* by forcing it into a narrow formal category.³⁸ Others have not grasped Augustine's full-orbed use of the term "confession" and have failed to appreciate the book's majestic and pervasive theme.³⁹ The proper formal categorization of Augustine's *Confessions* is not as crucial as the material understanding of Augustine's purpose. Augustine used his life history as a means to give glory to God for his providential work of mercy and grace. If the reader misses this point, he or she will fail to follow Augustine's finger, pointing to Heaven.

CONCLUSION

Augustine intended the *Confessions* to transcend the boundaries of a typical autobiography. He viewed the record of his life as the means to an end. Since that end held the eventual rest of his longing, restless heart, Augustine could not resist the celebration in praise and adoration of his merciful and gracious God. Like the Apostle Paul, all of Augustine's past accomplishments, which he once counted as gain, he considered loss in comparison to the surpassing greatness of gaining and knowing Christ. All of the *Confessions*, its vocabulary, theme, subject, and flow of thought, point to the fact that Augustine intended for his readers to look beyond the pages to where Augustine was looking all along and praise the great God who saves. Augustine models an important point of Christian character: the concern that one's life and testimony give glory to God and not to oneself. Thus, Augustine can rightly say that his readers' joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of him. This is the meaning, purpose, and significance of the *Confessions*, and it constitutes what Augustine "confessed." That so many of its commentators have missed this particular design of Augustine's is not so much surprising as it is lamentable. When one reads and understands the *Confessions* as only a literary masterpiece, it is to do exactly what its author wanted most to avoid, the praise of human beings. To read the *Confessions* as it was intended is not merely to fulfill its author's desire but to ascend to our highest and most glorious privilege, the praise of God.

³⁸Those who see the *Confessions* as strict biography are likely to miss the highly edifying element (e.g., Byrne, "Writing God's Story").

³⁹Those who do not fully appreciate Augustine's elastic use of "confession" have tended to see the work as primarily Augustine's introspective quest for meaning (e.g., McCarthy, "Desire, Recollection and Thought").