

## AUGUSTINE'S "TRINITARIAN" READING OF JOHN 5: A MODEL FOR THE THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE?

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During the last twenty years momentum has been building toward the "theological interpretation" of Scripture—particularly as an alternative to historical-critical approaches.<sup>1</sup> Although this movement is diverse, contemporary proponents of "theological interpretation" share several common concerns: (1) a desire to attend to the subject matter of Scripture—namely, the triune God; (2) a desire to read Scripture canonically as a coherent dramatic narrative; (3) a desire to read Scripture both within and for the Church; and (4) a desire to read Scripture under the guidance of the creeds.<sup>2</sup> An example of the latter can be seen in the Brazos Theological Commentary series which aims at "providing guidance for reading the Bible under the rule of faith."<sup>3</sup>

The purpose of this essay is to explore the role of the "Rule of Faith"<sup>4</sup> in biblical interpretation by engaging a concrete premodern example: Augustine's exposition of John 5:19–27 in his *In Johannis evangelium tractatus*.<sup>5</sup> Augustine's interpretation of John 5 provides an interesting test case for at least two reasons. First, through his exposition of this text, we are granted insight into the biblical foundations of two key elements of his theology: (1) his Trinitarian understanding of divine agency; and (2) his doctrine of

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<sup>1</sup> A helpful survey of these developments can be found in Dan Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> See David S. Yeago, "The New Testament and the Nicene Dogma: A Contribution to the Recovery of Theological Exegesis," *Pro Ecclesia* 3 (1994) 152–64; C. Kavin Rowe, "Biblical Pressure and Trinitarian Hermeneutics," *Pro Ecclesia* 11 (2002) 295–312; Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays, eds., *The Art of Reading Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); Kevin J. Vanhoozer et al., eds., *Dictionary of Theological Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005); and A. K. M. Adam, Stephen E. Fowl, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, and Francis Watson, *Reading Scripture with the Church: Toward a Hermeneutic for Theological Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Description from Brazos website (accessed April 10, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Among second and third-century writers, the Rule of Faith (*regula fidei*) represented a concise summary of Christian belief that provided direction for the proper reading of Scripture. For a helpful introduction to the Rule of Faith, see Paul Hartog, "The 'Rule of Faith' and Patristic Biblical Exegesis," *TrinJ* 28 NS (2007) 65–86.

<sup>5</sup> English citations from Augustine's *In Johannis evangelium tractatus* will be taken from Saint Augustine, *Fathers of the Church*, vol. 79: *Tractates on the Gospel of John, 11–27* (trans. John W. Rettig; Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1988). These *Tractates* were originally delivered as sermons to Augustine's congregation in Hippo (although some were likely delivered to smaller audiences).

eternal generation.<sup>6</sup> Second, the Rule of Faith plays an explicit role in his reading of this text. Although Augustine discusses John 5 in several other works (e.g. *De trinitate*), his *In Johannis evangelium tractatus* are ideally suited for this present investigation, both because they include a verse-by-verse commentary on the text and because *Tractate 20* contains his most mature theological reflection on Trinitarian agency.

My analysis will be divided into three sections. First, I will briefly outline Augustine's reading of John 5:19–27 as presented in *Tractates 18* and *19*. Next, I will explore the role of the Rule of Faith in his exposition of this text. I will argue that the Rule of Faith plays a crucial role in Augustine's reading of John 5 and that three specific "rules" shape his exposition of this text. Finally, I will close by considering the implications of Augustine's "ruled" reading for contemporary theological approaches to Scripture.

### I. AUGUSTINE'S EXPOSITION OF JOHN 5:19–27 IN HIS TRACTATES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

John 5 contains an account of Jesus healing an invalid, which provoked sharp criticism from the Jewish leaders (5:1–18). They were upset not only with Jesus' Sabbath-breaking, but also with the justification he provided—namely, equating his healing work with the work of "his" Father (5:17). The Jewish leaders construed Jesus' response as a blasphemous claim to equality with God (5:18). This narrative is followed by a lengthy discourse in which Jesus defends the appropriateness of his Sabbath-healing activity by appealing to the unique relationship he has with "the Father" (5:19–47).

Augustine discusses John 5:19–27 in several installments in *Tractates 18* to *21*.<sup>7</sup> Although he discusses the entire passage, verse 19 constitutes a key focus: "So Jesus said to them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise'" (5:19).<sup>8</sup> This should not be surprising. Not only was this passage cited by those who denied the equality of the Son to the Father but it also provided justification for a central element of Augustine's Trinitarian theology—namely, the inseparable action of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> It is outside the scope of this essay to discuss popular criticisms of Augustine such as those found in works of Colin Gunton, Cornelius Plantinga, Catherine LaCugna, and Karl Rahner. Lewis Ayres and Michel Barnes have deftly demonstrated that criticisms of Augustine by Gunton and others rest on fundamental misunderstandings of his Trinitarian theology. See Michel R. Barnes, "Rereading Augustine's Theology of the Trinity," in *The Trinity: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Trinity* (ed. Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, Gerald O'Collins; New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 145–76; Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); and idem, *Augustine and the Trinity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

<sup>7</sup> Although Augustine's discussion of John 5 in *Tractate 19* goes through verse 30, we will focus on verses 19–27. His discussion of verses 28–30 adds little to the argument to be developed here.

<sup>8</sup> For ease of reading, I will use the ESV translation of John 5. Augustine, of course, worked from a Latin translation of John.

<sup>9</sup> For discussion of the history of John 5:19 in Trinitarian debate, see Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity*, chap. 7; and Basil Studer, "Johannes 5, 19 f. in der Trinitätslehre der Kirchenväter," in

After pointing out that the evangelist speaks about the Son of God so that by his words believers may be "exercised and fed" (*Tract.* 18.1, 124), Augustine reminds his readers that "heresies" arise "when good Scriptures are not well understood" (*Tract.* 18.2, 125). The Jews, he notes, were distressed both rightly and wrongly (v. 18)—rightly, because a human being claimed to be God, and wrongly, because they did not recognize God in the human being (*Tract.* 18.2, 125). It is important to recognize that Jesus "did not equate his flesh to the Father" (*Tract.* 18.2, 126). Augustine reminds his readers that, as "Catholics," they understand Christ's true identity: he is not merely the Word, nor the flesh, but "the Word made flesh." This leads to a brief digression in which he reviews what his readers know to be true about the Word. John 1:1 teaches that the Word is "equal" to the Father as God, while 1:14 affirms that the Father is "greater" than the Word in his flesh. This accords with a "sound Catholic rule" (*regulam sanam catholicam*) that the Son is equal to the Father in his deity but less than the Father in his humanity (*Tract.* 18.2, 126). "Arian heretics" do not recognize this distinction.<sup>10</sup> As a result, they wrongly conclude that Jesus denies his equality to the Father in verse 19.

Against this reading, Augustine insists that verse 19 affirms the equality of the Son to the Father. "Heretics" misread this passage because they embrace a "carnal" perspective which treats the work of the Father and Son on the order of two human craftsmen, each doing separate work. This "fleshly" reading is ruled out by John 1:3, which teaches that all things were made by the Word. What, Augustine asks, does God create apart from the Word? If everything was created through the Word, then it cannot be the case that the Father does some works while the Son does others. Rather, the Father works through the Son in such a way that "no works are done either by the Father without the Son or by the Son without the Father" (*Tract.* 18.6, 130). Not only do the Father and Son do the *same* works (v. 19a) but they also do them "in like manner" (v. 19b). If the Son does the same works as the Father and also does them in the same manner, "[l]et the Jew be constrained, let the Christian believe, let the heretic be convicted. The Son is equal to the Father" (*Tract.* 18.8, 133).<sup>11</sup>

In verses 19 and 20, we are told that the Son "sees" and the Father "shows." How are we to understand this? Again, we must avoid "fleshly" interpretations that would lead us to think about "showing" and "seeing" as

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*"Imaginer la théologie catholique," permanence et transformations de la foi en attendant Jésus-Christ: Mélanges offerts à Ghislain Lafont* (Studia Anselmiana; ed. Jeremy Driscoll; Rome: Centro Studi S. Anselmo, 2000) 515–42.

<sup>10</sup> Augustine's opponents, whom he calls "Arians," were probably Latin Homoian theologians. See Michel R. Barnes, "Exegesis and Polemic in Augustine's *De Trinitate* I," *Augustinian Studies* 30 (1999) 43–52; and idem, "The Arians of Book V, and the Genre of '*de Trinitate*,'" *JTS* 44 (1993) 185–95. Although some scholars have suggested that references to "Arians" in Augustine's works simply represent a literary device, Barnes demonstrates that Augustine is engaged in polemic against Latin Homoian theologians throughout his entire career. These Latin Homoian theologians (e.g. Palladius and Bishop Maximinus) emphasized the Father as "true God" over and against the Son (particularly because of the Father's unique status as *ingenerate*).

<sup>11</sup> The logic of this assertion will become more transparent as Augustine proceeds.

involving two separate actions—the Father doing one action and the Son, by imitation, another. Because the working of the Father and the working of the Son are the *very same working*, we must think about “seeing” and “showing” in a different manner—in a way fitting a coeternal Father and Son. Augustine ultimately argues in *Tractate 21* that “seeing” and “showing” point to (and reflect) the “generation” of the Son by the Father.<sup>12</sup>

Turning to verse 20b, Augustine suggests that the “greater works” the Father will show the Son involve raising the dead and giving them life (v. 21). Is it the case, he asks, that the Father merely raises some of the dead and the Son raises the rest? If all things are “through the Son” (cf. 1:3) and the Father and Son act in “like manner” (v. 19b), then it must also be the case that the dead whom the Father raises are, in fact, identical to the dead whom the Son raises. Both the power and the will to raise the dead belong equally to the Father and the Son.

Verse 22 presents a unique challenge to Augustine: “The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son.” He has been arguing that, in every action, the Father and Son work inseparably. Yet this verse explicitly states that the Father judges “no one” but has entrusted all judgment to the Son. Augustine acknowledges that verse 22 appears to contradict the case he has been building. Promising to return to it in due course, he moves to verse 23, which affirms an identity of honor between the Father and the Son: “[T]hat all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him.” Although some view the Father as worthy of “greater honor” than the Son (e.g. Latin Homoian theologians), this text affirms an equality of honor between the Father and the Son. Those who cannot see the Son as worthy of identical honor wrongly assume that the Father “could not beget a Son equal to himself” (*Tract.* 19.7, 144).

Moving to verses 24–25, Augustine directs the reader’s attention to the fact that by hearing and believing the words of the Son, one hears and believes the words of the Father. “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life. Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.” Contextually this can be the case *only* because Jesus *is* the Word of the Father. The one who hears Jesus’ words and believes, passes from death to life. Augustine notes that two resurrections are spoken about in this passage: one that occurs at conversion (v. 24) and a future resurrection of the body (v. 25).

<sup>12</sup> “So, therefore, the Father shows to the Son the thing which he does, so that the Son sees all things in the Father and the Son is all things in the Father. For by seeing he was born and by being born he sees.” Augustine, *Tract.* 21.4, 182–83. Commenting on a similar passage in *Tractate 23*, Lewis Ayres explains, “Augustine describes the creation of the world as an inseparable act of Father and Son by identifying the Father’s con-joint actions with the Son (and by implication with Spirit) as always founded in the Father’s eternal generation of the Son, his eternal showing to the Son and the Son’s eternal seeing and doing” (*Augustine and the Trinity*, chap. 7).

After discussing the difference between these two resurrections, he turns to verse 26: "For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself." What does it mean that the Father has "life in himself"? Among other things, it means that the Father's "life" is completely different from human "life." Whereas the life of the soul is "mutable" and dependent on God, the life of God is "immutable" and dependent on nothing outside God (*Tract.* 19.8, 149). Augustine points out that the Son possesses a form of "life" identical to that of the Father—"life in himself" (v. 26b). How, he asks, did the Son receive this "life" from the Father? His answer is both simple and profound: the Father "begat" the Son. "The Father is life, not by a 'being born'; the Son is life by a 'being born.' The Father [is] from no Father; the Son, from God the Father" (*Tract.* 19.13, 152). Augustine suggests that the phrase "has been given" (v. 26) is roughly equivalent in meaning to "has been begotten" (*Tract.* 19.13, 152). Although Father and Son both possess "life in themselves," they possess it in differing ways: "Therefore, the Father remains life, the Son also remains life; the Father, life in himself, not from the Son, the Son, life in himself, but from the Father. [He was] begotten by the Father to be life in himself, but the Father [is] life in himself, unbegotten" (*Tract.* 19.13, 153). The Father did not beget a lesser being who would one day become his equal. He timelessly begat a coeternal Son.<sup>13</sup> In a beautiful turn of phrase, Augustine exhorts his readers to "[h]ear the Father through the Son. Rise, receive life that in him who has life in himself you may receive life which you do not have in yourself" (*Tract.* 19.13, 153).

Having established these points, Augustine turns to verse 27: "And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man." The reference to Christ as "Son of Man" provides an occasion for Augustine to reflect on the identity of Christ in way that that nicely anticipates the Chalcedonian definition. Although there is but one person—the Word—this one person possesses two natures—human and divine (*Tract.* 19.15, 156). This distinction provides a hermeneutical key to resolving the difficulty Augustine encountered in verse 22. How can Augustine reconcile the affirmation in verse 22 that the Father judges no one but has entrusted all judgment to the Son with his claim that Father, Son, and Spirit always act inseparably? His answer draws upon a distinction between the two natures of Christ in the context of his eschatology. One of the texts that plays a key role in Augustine's eschatology is Matt 5:8, which teaches that only "the pure in heart will see God."<sup>14</sup> Augustine understands Matt 5:8 to teach that only the righteous will be given a vision of the triune God.<sup>15</sup> The wicked, on the other hand, will

<sup>13</sup> It should be noted that Augustine's doctrine of "eternal generation" is deeply embedded in his reading of the Gospel and is not merely dependent on the translation of *monogenēs*. This point seems to be missed by those who claim that little or no biblical warrant exists for a doctrine of eternal generation.

<sup>14</sup> On the role of Matt 5:8 in Augustine's eschatology, see Michel R. Barnes, "The Visible Christ and the Invisible Trinity: Mt. 5:8 in Augustine's Trinitarian Theology of 400," *Modern Theology* 19 (2003) 329–55.

<sup>15</sup> One of the central themes in *De trinitate* is "contemplation." Contemplation of the triune God represents the ultimate goal of the economy of salvation and the means by which Christians

see the Son not in the “form of God” but only in the “form of a servant” (in his human nature). Thus, when John 5:22 affirms that the Father has entrusted all judgment to the Son, it simply means that the wicked will “see” the Son *only* in his humanity, “hidden in the servant” (*Tract.* 19.16, 158).

## II. AUGUSTINE’S APPROACH TO SCRIPTURE: A “RULED” READING

Augustine’s reading of Scripture is clearly governed by the Rule of Faith.<sup>16</sup> At several points in his exposition of John 5, he identifies interpretive “rules” that must inform a “Catholic” reading of Scripture in its witness to Christ. For example, at the beginning of *Tractate* 18 he explains that the “sound rule of faith” (*sanam fidei regulam*) must govern our reading of Scripture especially in the case of those passages that are difficult to understand (*Tract.* 18.1, 125). Similarly, in his exposition of verse 19 he appeals to a “sound Catholic rule” (*regulam sanam catholicam*) with which his readers would be familiar (*Tract.* 18.2, 126). He also uses the language “the Catholic faith holds . . .” and what follows clearly functions as a hermeneutical “rule” (cf. *Tract.* 20.3; 20.6).

Before we examine the function of these “rules” in his exposition of John 5, we should make some general observations about his approach. First, the primary focus of Augustine’s discussion is the subject matter rendered in the text—namely, the triune God and God’s actions in the economy of salvation. Second, although much of his discussion of John 5 focuses upon what might be described as the “literal sense” of the text, Augustine does not limit himself to this approach.<sup>17</sup> Third, his exposition assumes the unity of Scripture.<sup>18</sup> As a result, he uses one part of Scripture to shed light on another. Fourth, false teaching provides an important backdrop for his exposition. At several points, he explicitly identifies and criticizes “Arian” readings of John 5:19ff.<sup>19</sup> Finally, Augustine’s exposition of John 5 might be identified as “redemptive” (or “pastoral”) in the sense that it aims at drawing readers more deeply into the life of the triune God. Augustine believes that the evangelist wrote his description of Christ so that believers might be “exercised and fed” (*Tract.* 18.1, 124). He acknowledges that understanding the “divine” is difficult and

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grow spiritually. See A. N. Williams, “Contemplation: Knowledge of God in Augustine’s *De Trinitate*,” in *Knowing the Triune God: The Work of the Spirit in the Practices of the Church* (ed. James J. Buckley and David S. Yeago; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001) 121–46.

<sup>16</sup> For a helpful introduction to the Rule of Faith in Augustine, see Brian M. Litfin, “The Rule of Faith in Augustine,” *Pro Ecclesia* 14 (2005) 85–101. As Litfin notes, “The Rule of Faith very often functioned as an interpretive device for Augustine, in which the apostolic faith was summarized and could be brought to bear on pressing theological or exegetical questions” (p. 88).

<sup>17</sup> This can be seen clearly in *Tractate* 17 in which he offers an “allegorical” reading of the key elements of the healing of the paralytic.

<sup>18</sup> An indirect allusion to this assumption can be seen in *Tractate* 19: “Therefore there is a peace in the Scripture, and all things have been set in order, not at all in conflict” (Augustine, *Tract.* 19.7, 145).

<sup>19</sup> See n. 10.

invites the faithful "to knock and seek" so that they might grow (*Tract.* 18.1, 125). In this context, he presents the evangelist as a model Christian who has ascended from the fleshly realm to contemplate the Son of God in his divinity. It should be evident that significant overlap exists between Augustine's concerns and the concerns of those who advocate "theological" readings of Scripture. With this context in mind, we will explore the role of the Rule of Faith in his exposition of John 5.

At least three "rules" shape Augustine's reading of John 5. The first "rule," which he articulates in *Tractate* 18, concerns a distinction between the Son in the "form of a servant" and the Son in the "form of God." He explains this rule in greater detail in *De trinitate*.<sup>20</sup> When reading Scripture, we must distinguish between the Son in the "form of God" (i.e. in his deity) and the Son in the "form of a servant" (i.e. in his humanity).<sup>21</sup> Problems arise when people confuse these two forms: "This has misled people who are careless about examining or keeping in view the whole range of the scriptures, and they have tried to transfer what is said of Christ Jesus as man to that substance of his which was everlasting before the incarnation and is everlasting still" (*De trin.* I.14, 74).

Augustine explains that the distinction between the Son in the "form of a servant" and the Son in the "form of God" is inadequate to address a number of passages that speak of the Son neither as "less" than the Father nor "equal" to the Father, but rather intimate that the Son is "from" the Father. Another "rule" must be brought to bear on these texts: "This then is the rule [*regula*] which governs many scriptural texts, intended to show not that one person is less than the other, but only that one is from the other" (*De trin.* II.3, 99). Augustine explicitly cites John 5:19 and 5:26 as examples of this second rule. Commenting on verses 19 and 26, Augustine explains, "So the reason for these statements can only be that the life of the Son is unchanging like the Father's, and yet is from the Father [5:26]; and that the work of Father and Son is indivisible, and yet the Son's working is from the Father just as he himself is from the Father [5:19]; and the way in which the Son sees the Father is simply by being the Son" (*De trin.* II.3, 99). This second rule is central not only to his reading of John 5 but also the numerous "sending" texts scattered throughout the Gospel of John. Combining these two rules, Augustine suggests that NT references to Christ can be grouped into three categories: (1) texts which refer to Son in the "form of God" (*forma Dei*) in which he is equal to the Father (e.g. Phil 2:6; John 10:30); (2) texts which refer to the Son in the "form of a servant" (*forma servi*) in which he is "less" than the Father (e.g. John 14:28); and (3) texts which suggest that the Son is "from" the Father (*De trin.* II.3, 98).

<sup>20</sup> English citations of *De trinitate* will be taken from Saint Augustine, *The Trinity* (trans. Edmund Hill; Brooklyn: New City Press, 1991).

<sup>21</sup> "Provided then that we know this rule [*regula*] for understanding the scriptures about God's Son and can thus distinguish the two resonances in them, one tuned to the form of God in which he is, and is equal to the Father, the other tuned to the form of a servant which he took and is less than the Father, we will not be upset by statements in the holy books that appear to be in flat contradiction with each other" (Augustine, *De trin.* I.22, 82).

In addition to rules naming three ways in which Scripture speaks about the Son, there is third “rule” that Augustine brings to bear on his reading of John 5 concerning inseparable action. The inseparable action of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit represents a fundamental axiom of Augustine’s Trinitarian theology<sup>22</sup>—an assumption he shares not only with the entire Latin pro-Nicene tradition but also the Greek-speaking theologians of the East (e.g. the Cappadocians).<sup>23</sup> Although Augustine alludes to the indivisible action of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in *Tractates* 18 and 19, his most extensive discussion can be found in *Tractate* 20. Written after *De trinitate*, *Tractate* 20 contains his most mature account of Trinitarian agency.<sup>24</sup> After reviewing the context of John 5, Augustine outlines a key principle that must guide one’s reading of verse 19: “The Catholic faith, made firm by the Spirit of God in its saints, holds this against every heretical depravity: The works of the Father and the Son are inseparable” (*Tract.* 20.3, 166).<sup>25</sup> The Catholic faith does not teach that the Father does one thing while the Son does something else. Whatever the Father does, the Son does as well.

According to Augustine, when Jesus explains to the Jews that he can only do what he sees the Father doing, he is basically saying, “Why were you scandalized because I said, God is my Father, and because I make myself equal to God? I am equal in such a way that he begot me; I am equal in such a way that he is not from me, but I am from him” (*Tract.* 20.4, 167). Why does the Son’s ability to work come from the Father? Simply because he himself

<sup>22</sup> Lewis Ayres and Michel Barnes argue that the inseparable action of the divine persons constitutes one of the fundamental axioms of Augustine’s Trinitarian theology. Augustine inherited this axiom from pro-Nicene writers such as Ambrose and Hilary. Anti-Nicene theologians argued that the distinct activity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit indicated that the divine persons were separate beings (with the Father being superior). In response, pro-Nicene writers like Hilary and Ambrose argued that Scripture shows the activity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to be one (i.e. all three persons are involved in creation, redemption and sanctification). Thus, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit share one nature. See Lewis Ayres, “The Fundamental Grammar of Augustine’s Trinitarian Theology,” in *Augustine and his Critics: Essays in Honour of Gerald Bonner* (ed. Robert Dodaro and George Lawless; London; New York: Routledge, 2000) 55–56; and Michel R. Barnes, “The Logic of Augustine’s Trinitarian Theology” (unpublished paper presented at the “Aquinas the Augustinian Conference,” February 4, 2005) 7–11.

<sup>23</sup> “Although this doctrine is fundamental to late fourth-century, orthodox, Latin theology, it is important that we do not think of ‘inseparable operation’ as a peculiarly Latin phenomenon. The inseparable operation of the three irreducible persons is a fundamental axiom of those theologies which provide the context for the Council of Constantinople in AD 381 and for the reinterpretation of Nicaea, which came to be the foundation of orthodox or catholic theology at the end of the fourth century. It is a principle found in all the major orthodox Greek theologians of the later fourth and fifth centuries, and enters later Orthodox tradition through such figures as John of Damascus in the eighth century” (Ayres, “The Fundamental Grammar of Augustine’s Trinitarian Theology” 56).

<sup>24</sup> Barnes, “The Logic of Augustine’s Trinitarian Theology” 8.

<sup>25</sup> In medieval Latin theology, this reality is expressed through the axiom the *opera ad extra sunt indivisa* (“the external works are undivided”). Although this concept, as expressed above, is faithful to his theology, Augustine prefers to say that works (*opera*) of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are “inseparable” (*inseparabilia*). The following statement from *Tractate* 20.3 is typical of Augustine’s preferred manner of describing inseparable action: *patris et filii opera inseparabilia sunt* (“the works of the Father and Son are inseparable”).

is *from* the Father.<sup>26</sup> Thus, his power comes from the Father as well.<sup>27</sup> Some, however, see the Son as "less" than the Father in ability, power, and honor. This arises from a "carnal understanding" of Christ's words (*Tract.* 20.5, 168). To help those who struggle to see the equality of the Son to the Father, Augustine provides a concrete example. From the Gospels, we know Jesus walked upon water. Where, in the Gospels, do we see the Father walking on water? If the Son does only what he "sees" the Father doing, then must it not be the case that the Father walked on the water as well? The "Catholic faith" has a simple solution to this problem: the eternal Son walked on the water with the "flesh" walking and the "divinity" guiding its steps (*Tract.* 20.6, 169–70). When this took place, was the Father absent? By no means! John 14:10 reminds us that the Father abiding in the Son does his works.<sup>28</sup> Thus, the walking of the Son on the water is the work of both the Father and the Son. This, Augustine suggests, is precisely the thrust of John 5:19.

Augustine offers a second example of inseparable action. Genesis 1 teaches that God created light. What light did the Son create? It certainly cannot be a *different* light. Rather, it is precisely the same light: "Therefore, we understand that the light was made by God the Father, but through the Son" (*Tract.* 20.7, 170). Similarly, the Father created the earth. The Son did not create another world by "watching" the Father. Rather the world was created by the Father through the Son. Thus, the reason the Son can do nothing of himself (John 5:19) is simply because "[t]he Son is not of himself" (*Tract.* 20.8, 171). The following statement not only summarizes Augustine's understanding of the inseparable action of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit but it also encapsulates his understanding of Trinitarian agency: "The Father [made] the world, the Son [made] the world, the Holy Spirit [made] the world. If [there are] three gods, [there are] three worlds; if [there is] one God, Father and Son and Holy Spirit, one world was made by the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit" (*Tract.* 20.9, 172).<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Here we see Augustine bringing his second rule to bear in his explanation of inseparable action.

<sup>27</sup> A reciprocal relationship exists between nature and power for Augustine: "Therefore, because the Son's power is from the Father, for that reason the Son's substance also is from the Father; and because the Son's substance [is] from the Father, for that reason the Son's power is from the Father" (*Tract.* 20.4, 168).

<sup>28</sup> "Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works" (John 14:10).

<sup>29</sup> It should be noted that the Cappadocians speak about the inseparable action of the divine persons in virtually identical terms. For example, in his "Answer to Ablabius," Gregory of Nyssa explains, "We do not learn that the Father does something on his own, in which the Son does not co-operate. Or again, that the Son acts on his own without the Spirit. Rather does every operation which extends from God to creation and is designated according to our differing conceptions of it have its origin in the Father, proceed through the Son, and reach its completion by the Holy Spirit. It is for this reason that the word for the operation is not divided among the persons involved. For the action of each in any matter is not separate and individualized. But whatever occurs, whether in reference to God's providence for us or the government and constitution of the universe, occurs through the three Persons, and it not three separate things." Gregory of Nyssa, "An Answer to Ablabius: That We Should Not Think of Saying There Are Three Gods," in *Christology of the Later*

III. AUGUSTINE'S "RULED" READING:  
A MODEL FOR THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION?

One of my professors was fond of telling students that if they choose to preach the Bible apart from the guidance of the creeds, they should not call what they are doing "Christian" preaching. Augustine would agree. Contemporary proponents of "theological" interpretation call for reading Scripture in light of the Rule of Faith. Augustine's exposition of John 5:19–27 provides a concrete example of a "ruled" reading of Scripture. Broadly speaking, three "rules" shape Augustine's reading of John 5: (1) a rule regarding a distinction between the Son in the "form of God" (i.e. his deity) and the Son in the "form of a servant" (i.e. his humanity); (2) a rule applying to texts such as John 5:19 and 5:26 that reveal one person as proceeding "from" another; and (3) a rule regarding the inseparable action of the divine persons. These rules serve important hermeneutical functions: they help the faithful rightly read Scripture in its witness to Christ and protect the Church from falling into heresy.

A contemporary attempt to read the Gospel of John in light of the Rule of Faith can be found in *Father, Son and Spirit: The Trinity and John's Gospel* by Andreas Köstenberger and Scott Swain.<sup>30</sup> In the introduction to their study, they outline five elements that shape their interpretive approach. One of these elements is the creeds: "We have enlisted the aid of the church in our study, including its official doctrinal pronouncements (e.g. the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, the Chalcedonian Creed etc.) and its most trusted teachers (e.g. Augustine, Cyril of Alexandria, John of Damascus, John Calvin etc.)."<sup>31</sup> They justify this move on the ground that the church's creedal affirmations do not represent a corruption of Scripture but rather "constitute mature, exegetically trustworthy pathways into Holy Scripture."<sup>32</sup> Their discussion of Jesus' "filial identity" (chapter 7) clearly draws upon the rules Augustine outlines. For example, Augustine's second rule (i.e. that some texts indicate that the Son is "from" the Father) provides a hermeneutical key to their constructive account of the sonship and divine agency of Jesus. Their work bears witness to the exegetical fruit to be gleaned from reading Scripture in light of the Rule of Faith.

Of course, once we acknowledge that we should read Scripture in light of the Rule of Faith, an important question arises: what elements are included in the Rule of Faith? It is at this point that Augustine presents a challenge to contemporary readers—a challenge seen most clearly in the case of his third "rule." If we want to follow Augustine and the entire pro-Nicene tradition in the early church (West and East) in reading Scripture in light of the Rule of

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*Fathers* (Library of Christian Classics; ed. Edward R. Hardy; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1954) 261–62.

<sup>30</sup> Andreas J. Köstenberger and Scott R. Swain, *Father, Son and Spirit: The Trinity and John's Gospel* (NSBT; ed. D. A. Carson; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2008). See especially chaps. 7–10.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* 23.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

Faith, then the inseparable action of the divine persons should guide our reading. At stake in the affirmation of the inseparable action of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is nothing less than the unity of God (i.e. monotheism).<sup>33</sup> Because the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity,<sup>34</sup> one cannot reject inseparable operation at the economic level and still affirm a unity of nature at the intra-Trinitarian level.

This hermeneutical "rule" regarding inseparable action, however, is at odds with (or neglected by) a large cross-section of contemporary scholarship—especially in the case of those who promote "social" understandings of the Trinity in which Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are construed as three distinct centers of consciousness and will.<sup>35</sup> Evangelicals are no exception to this trend.<sup>36</sup> The inseparable action of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit plays little constructive role in several popular evangelical systematic theology texts. For example, in a list of "essential elements" of Trinitarian doctrine, Millard Erickson neither identifies nor discusses the unity of action. His explanation of the economic activity of the divine persons focuses exclusively on their distinctive roles: "[O]ne member of the Trinity may for a time be subordinate to one or both of the other members, but that does not mean he is in any

<sup>33</sup> This is not to suggest that a complete account of Trinitarian agency can be reduced to this axiom. On the one hand, the working of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is indivisibly the work of the three *ad extra*. On the other hand, in this single act, the divine persons act according to their relative properties *ad intra*. The Son, for example, acts with the Father according to his "fromness" (i.e. in his "filial" mode of being "from the Father"). Herman Bavinck effectively captures both dimensions of Trinitarian agency: "Granted, all God's outward works (*opera ad extra*) are common to the three persons. 'God's works *ad extra* are indivisible, though the order and distinction of the persons is preserved.' It is always one and the same God who acts both in creation and recreation. In that unity, however, the order the three persons is preserved. The 'ontological' Trinity is mirrored in the 'economic' Trinity. For that reason special properties and works are attributed to each of the three persons—though not exclusively, as Abelard believed—in such a way that the order present between the persons in the ontological Trinity is revealed." Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2: *God and Creation* (ed. John Bolt; trans. John Friend; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004) 318.

<sup>34</sup> Affirming the first half of Rahner's axiom (the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity) as I do does not require one to affirm the second half of his axiom (the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity). The first half of Rahner's axiom simply affirms that God is, in himself, as he reveals himself to be in the economy of salvation, while the second half of his axiom runs the risk of collapsing the immanent Trinity to the economic Trinity.

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993): "In contrast to the psychological doctrine of the Trinity, we are therefore developing a social doctrine of the Trinity, and one based on salvation history" (p. 19). Similarly, "We have understood the unity of the divine trinitarian history as the open, unifying at-oneness of the three divine Persons in the relationships to one another. If this uniting at-oneness of the triune God is the quintessence of salvation, then its 'transcendent primordial ground' cannot be seen to lie in the one, single, homogeneous divine essence (*substantia*), or in the one identical, absolute subject. It then lies in the eternal perichoresis of the Father, Son, and Spirit" (p. 157).

<sup>36</sup> *Father, Son and Spirit* represents an exception to this trend. Reading the Gospel of John in the light of the Rule of Faith, Köstenberger and Swain explicitly affirm the indivisible action of the divine persons. Commenting on John 1:3, Köstenberger and Swain explain that "the distinction between God and the Word with respect to the act of creation is a distinction within the singular creative agency of the one God" (*Father, Son and Spirit* 114). In a footnote, they link this claim to an "ancient rule" regarding the inseparable action of the divine persons.

way inferior in essence.”<sup>37</sup> Similarly, Wayne Grudem, while emphasizing the unity of the divine persons ontologically, focuses on the distinctive roles of the Father, Son, and Spirit in the economy of salvation: “Thus, while the persons of the Trinity are equal in all their attributes, they nonetheless differ in their relationships to the creation.”<sup>38</sup> Finally, in his discussion of external works of the Trinity (*opera ad extra*), Charles Ryrie simply emphasizes the distinct “works” of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.<sup>39</sup> These represent cases in which attention to the Rule of Faith might have led to a richer and more adequate presentation of Trinitarian doctrine.

Although this renewed emphasis on theological interpretation is a welcome development, to some evangelicals it may simply sound like old news. Perhaps the greatest challenge for evangelicals from this movement concerns its emphasis upon reading Scripture in light of the creeds.<sup>40</sup> While there are pitfalls to be avoided, this movement may stimulate us to think in more fruitful ways about “ruled” readings of Scripture. It is here that Augustine may help suggest a way forward. His exposition of John 5 not only provides a model for a “ruled” reading of Scripture, it also highlights the benefits of such a reading for those who are committed to wedding biblical exegesis with theological orthodoxy.

<sup>37</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998) 363. In a book devoted entirely to the doctrine of the Trinity, Erickson offers the following summary of Trinitarian agency: “At the same time, this unity and equality do not require identity of function. There are certain roles that distinctively belong primarily to one, although all participate in the function of each.” Millard J. Erickson, *God in Three Persons: A Contemporary Interpretation of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995) 331.

<sup>38</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Bible Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995) 249.

<sup>39</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology: A Popular Systematic Guide to Understanding Biblical Truth* (Chicago: Moody, 1999) 62.

<sup>40</sup> It should be noted that many evangelicals implicitly read Scripture in light of the creeds without explicitly acknowledging it. One example would be use of the distinction between “person” and “nature” that is commonly used to explicate a doctrine of the Trinity.