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Likely for most of us who would consider ourselves evangelicals, Augustine serves—at least in

some way—as a hero. We know that *City of God* is a classic, even if we struggled to plod through the first several hundred pages rather slowly. And we likely have read all or part of *Confessions*, even if the chapters on time, memory, and creation proved to be rather turgid. Whether we tend to be more Arminian or Calvinistic in our soteriology, we find an ally in Augustine—although granted the Calvinistic or

Reformed folks probably relish a bit more certain components of the Augustine-Pelagius literary debate.

But in the few minutes we have here today I want to look at perhaps what is Augustine's most significant theological work, *De Trinitate*—although it is hard to argue that it is more theologically significant than *City of God*. Nonetheless, I am convinced that when it is given due attention, *De Trinitate* proves to be a penetrating and sophisticated theological treatise that repays the attention is able to give it.

My goal in the following paper is as follows. First, I want to outline—albeit briefly—the logic,

nature, and purpose of *De Trinitate* as a theological treatise. While certainly Augustine treats the doctrine of the Trinity throughout his broader corpus, we will focus on *De Trinitate*. Second, I will try and tease out a bit the implications of coming to terms with the logic, nature, and purpose of *De Trinitate* as a

theological treatise by suggesting what are the central interpretive keys and theological insights which emerge from a close reading of *De Trinitate*. That is, what benefit is there in coming to terms with the logic, nature, and purpose of *De Trinitate*?

I. The Logic, Nature, and Purpose of *De Trinitate*

I have now been teaching theology full-time for over twelve years. As I teach courses in systematic, historical, and biblical theology, one of the challenges is to help students understand the backdrop or background to how Christian doctrine developed over time. That is, it is tempting to want to give students various “bullet-point” summaries of key doctrines, supply a few key Scripture references, and then move on to the next doctrine. The scarcity of time is always a challenge to teaching. I suspect this tendency to give “bullet-point” summaries can be particularly debilitating when summarizing Augustine on the Trinity. It is tempting to want to say something like: “Augustine believed he could find analogies for the Trinity in the human mind, since we humans are made in the image of God—who is a Trinity. Augustine wrestled with various analogies: lover, loved love, and various analogies from the notions of mind and memory: the mind, its love, and its knowledge; memory, thought, will; the mind remembering, understanding, and loving itself, etc.” Now, my five line summary is actually completely true in that there are no “errors” per se in the summary. But when one actually takes the time to wade through *De Trinitate* there is much more going on, and one gets a glimpse of Augustine wrestling with a number of issues as he wrestles with how best to speak of the Trinitarian God of Holy writ.

A. The Basic Structure of *De Trinitate*
A Brief Outline of Augustine's *De Trinitate*
(adapted from Edmund Hill's translation)

Three Equal Divine Persons	Book I: The Absolute Equality of the Divine Persons	
The Missions	Book II: Missions: Old Testament Theophanies	{
	Book III: Missions: The Work of Angels	
	Book IV: Missions: The Work of the Mediator	
	Book V: Linguistic and Logical: Substance and Relationship	
Linguistic and Logical Issues	Book VI: Linguistic and Logical: The Problem of Appropriation	{
	Book VII: Linguistic and Logical: The Problem Solved	
	Book VIII: Through the Looking-Glass ○○○○○○	
The Turn Inward	Book IX: Psychological: Mental Image, First Draft ○○○○○○	{
	Book X: Psychological: Mental Image, Second Draft	
	Book XI: Psychological: Mental Image, Lesser Analogies	
The Human Mind	Book XII: Man's Case History: The Image Broken Up; The Fall	{
	Book XIII: Man's Case History: The Image Repaired; Redemption	
	Book XIV: Man's Case History: The Image Perfected	
	Book XV: The Absolute Inadequacy of the Perfected Image	
The <i>Imago Dei</i> : Repaired, Redeemed, Perfected		{
The End in Sight		{

Although there is always some danger in offering too neat a summary of any sort of treatise. The above outline is probably fair enough. After a "introductory" book of sorts (Book I), Books II, III, and IV treat Old Testament theophanies, the work of angels, and the work of Christ, respectively. Books V, VI, and VII—the object of much work by many scholars—wade through various linguistic and logical issues related to speaking about Son. Book VIII, as Edmund Hill sees it, witnesses a "turn inward" as Augustine begins to move to the "interior man" as carries on his quest to speak rightfully about the Trinitarian God.

Books IX, X, and XI consist of Augustine's often quite belabored attempts to work through various so-called "psychological analogies" for the Trinity. Augustine continues to work through such analogies in Books XII, XIII, and XIV, but does so with an eye to fracture state of man, and how the image can be restored in man. Augustine concludes the work in Book XV.

When one stands back and looks at the structure and flow of *De Trinitate* it quickly becomes clear that there is a fairly "tight" organizational structure to the volume—particularly more focus and organized than the wide-ranging and sprawling *De Civitate Dei*. Let us expand the brief outline above, and try to get a glimpse of the logic, purpose, and nature of *De Trinitate*.

From the very beginning of the volume, we grasp that Augustine's motive—at least in part—is polemical. He opens the volume: "The reader of these reflections of mine on the Trinity should bear in mind that my pen is on the watch against the sophistries of those who scorn the starting-point of faith, and allow themselves to be deceived through an unseasonable and misguided love of reason."¹ We are also informed early in the treatise that properly thinking about God or construing God is extremely difficult. We cannot simply move from (1) knowledge or understanding of a created thing to (2) who God is—as if we can do so by means of extrapolation or the like. And the problem is not simply or

finitude. The problem is also our fallenness. Augustine writes: "So then it is difficult to contemplate and have full knowledge of God's substance, which without any change in itself makes things that change, and without any passage of time in itself creates things that exist in time." Augustine then writes, "That is why it is necessary for our minds to be purified before the inexpressible reality can be inexpressibly seen by them; and in order to make us fit and capable of grasping it, we are led along more endurable routes, nurtured on faith as long as we have not yet been endowed with that necessary purification."² Purification—here we come to a key theme. If we do not grasp the notion of intellectual purification, and how this theme is central to the nature and purpose of *De Trinitate*, we will never understand what

¹ *De trin.*, I.1.
² *De trin.*, I.3.

Augustine is doing in this treatise. Just a little later Augustine can write that “that supreme goodness does exist which only the most purified minds can gaze upon, and also that they are themselves unable to gaze upon it and grasp it for the good reason that the human mind with its weak eyesight cannot concentrate on so overwhelming a light, unless it has been nursed back to full vigor on the *justice of faith* (Rom. 4:13).”³

Augustine proceeds to give a brief summary of the doctrine of the Trinity, a doctrine which he receives from the Scriptures and the tradition of which he is a part:

[A]ccording to the scriptures Father and Son and Holy Spirit in the inseparable equality of one substance present a divine unity; and therefore there are not three gods but one God; although indeed the Father has begotten the Son, and therefore he who is the Father is not the Son; and the Son is begotten by the Father, and therefore he who is the Son is not the Father; and the Holy Spirit is neither the Father nor the Son, but only the spirit of the Father and of the Son, himself coequal to the Father and the Son, and belonging to the threefold unity.⁴

Augustine of course teaches that all of the persons work in all that God does. As Augustine writes: “the

trinity works inseparably in every that God works” (*opera trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa*).⁵

Augustine at a number of points says something we cannot miss: he is attempting to explore what he believes. Augustine is engaging in theological exploration, and invites his readers to let him know if they think is going astray. Augustine can write:

But it is proper, and God will surely grant it, that I should also do myself a little good by serving them [i.e., those who seek to learn more about the Trinity] with something to read; and that in being prompt to answer their questions I should also find the answers to my own. And so at the bidding of the Lord our God and with his aid I have undertaken, not so much to discuss with authority what I have already learned, as to learn by discussing it with modest piety.⁶

In sum—Augustine is seeking to explore and understand what he already believes. *De Trinitate* is a work of theological exploration, where an attempt is made to say something meaningful about what is already believed on the basis of the authorities of Scripture and tradition.

³ *De trin.*, 1.4.
⁴ *De trin.*, 1.7.
⁵ *De trin.*, 1.8.
⁶ *De trin.*, 1.8.

Augustine proceeds to summarize a hermeneutical role he will follow: since Scripture seems to be speak (1) sometimes of the Son as equal to the Father, (2) sometimes of the Son as less than the Father, and "equal to" passages are to be "understood in the form of God," and "less" passages are to be

understood "in virtue of the form of a servant."⁷

In *De Trinitate* I.16 Augustine begins to unpack a central theme: our future face-to-face vision of God. In the context of mentioning I Cor. 15:24 ("Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power"), Augustine says that what Paul is referring or alluding to is that fact—taken from I Cor. 13:12—that Christ the mediator is going to bring the redeemed to the direct sight of God. I Cor. 13:12 is key to the whole purpose of *De Trinitate*. I Cor. 13:12 reads: "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known."⁸ Augustine references such texts as Acts 15:9 (where our hearts are cleansed by faith), Matt. 5:8 (where the clean of heart shall see God)⁹, as well as Jn. 14:22 (where Augustine interprets Jesus' "I will show myself to him" in terms of our face-to-face and future contemplation of God).¹⁰

From the first book of *De Trinitate* Augustine will argue that this face-to-face vision of God is ultimately by *faith*, a notion to which he returns throughout *De Trinitate*: "It is through this faith that we come at last to sight, so that he may love us for actually being what he now loves us that we might be; and that we may no more be what he now hates us for being, and what he urges and helps us not to want to be for ever."¹¹

⁷ *De trin.*, I.14-16.

⁸ I have chosen generally to quote from the English Standard Version. Where it is important to point out something unique about the (Latin) text Augustine may have been reading, or may have had in mind, I will try and point that out.

⁹ *De trin.*,

¹⁰ *De trin.*, I.18.

¹¹ *De trin.*, I.21.

After briefly returning to the hermeneutical role that the Son is equal to the Father in the form of God, and less than the Father in the form of a *servant*¹³, Augustine turns to the “sendings” of the Son and the Spirit. Augustine raises three questions. The first is answered in Book II, the second in Book III, and the third in Book IV. The first question is: which of the three persons were manifested in the Old Testament theophanies, or perhaps was it simply God—all three persons—who were manifested in the Old Testament theophanies. A central question which is then raised is, related to the nature of the “sendings” of the Son and Spirit *in time*, and what this implies or does not imply about the eternal *processions* of the Son and Father. That is—how is one to relate *temporal sendings* (of Son and Spirit) and *eternal processions* (of Son and Spirit). The question of temporal sendings is broached in terms of the Old Testament theophanies. To wit—*who* was it who appeared to the Old Testament saints, in the so-called theophanies. Augustine—interestingly—chooses something of an undogmatic path. He argues that it could in fact be the Father who has appeared—i.e., it is wrong to say that the Father has never

Book II

Edmund Hill has chosen to group Books II, III, and IV under the rubric of “Missions”—“missions” in terms of the Old Testament Theophanies (Book II), the Work of Angels (Book III), and the Work of the Mediator (Book IV).

Books II, III, and IV

Ultimately, Augustine argues, it is the “form of man” that judges (rather than “the form of God”), for it would not be appropriate for the lost to see the Son “simply” in “the form of God”—for such a face-to-face vision is reserved for the redeemed.¹²

manifested himself in some sort of theophanic or earthy or material way.¹⁴ And one of the key conclusions in this book is regardless of what one concludes about exactly which person or persons were manifested in a physical way, the divine *substance* itself cannot be physically seen.¹⁵

Book III

In Book III Augustine turns the work of angels in terms of Old Testament theophanies.

Augustine's key conclusion is that angels were indeed the secondary cause of the theophanies in the Old Testament. Augustine is here answering the second of three questions broached in Book II: how were the visible manifestations of God in the Old Testament—the Old Testament theophanies—managed, or brought about. The significance of Augustine's argument here—to argue that it was angels who were at work in the Old Testament theophanies—cannot be fully understood until we turn to Book IV, where Augustine deals with the third of three questions broached back in Book II.

Book IV

Book IV is one of the most interesting of all of *De Trinitate*. He takes up the third of three

questions broached in Book II, which is: may we speak of the *sendings* of the Son and Spirit occurring before the New Testament era? That is, were the Son and Spirit “sent” before the first century. As he answers this question, he spends a good bit of time on Christ's role of mediator. This may shock us or throw us off. Why a long “digression” on the atonement when writing a treatise on the divine Trinity. I believe it is essential to recognize that this apparent “digression” is not a “digression” at all, but is central to the logic, purpose, and nature of *De Trinitate*—and we will return to why it is so central soon.

But perhaps one of the keys to Book IV is that Augustine spends time thinking through the temporal *sendings* because he is going to conclude that the *sendings* in time are reflective of the *processions* in

¹⁴ Augustine offers a helpful summary of this book's argument in *De trin.*, II.32-35.
¹⁵ *De trin.*, II.35.

eternity. That is: the temporal *sendings* reflect the eternal *processions*. As Edmund Hill has written: "the heart of it [i.e., the Trinitarian mystery] lies in the eternal generation of the son and procession of the Spirit, and the missions open up this inner core of the mystery for our contemplation."¹⁶

Augustine is quite clear in Book IV—and makes the point repeatedly—that fallen man is unable to approach God, or ultimately to see God, on his own. To see God face-to-face (again, 1 Cor. 13:12 is key) means that we must be cleansed, and this cleansing comes from the blood of Christ shed for us.

Augustine writes: "to contemplate God, which by nature we are not, we would have to be cleansed by him who became what by nature we are and what by sin we are not. By nature we are not God; by nature we are men; by sin we are not just. So God became a just man to intercede with God for sinful man."¹⁷

Augustine argues that while the devil was a *false* mediator, Christ is the *true* mediator. The evil one is marked by a love of *power* rather than *justice*. We have come under the devil's power because we followed Adam, who sinned in our place. Christ has now come, and conquers the evil one. We will see—

particularly in Book XIII—that it is a mistake to see Augustine simply as an advocate of a "Christus

Victor" theory of atonement versus a more "satisfaction" theory, for ultimately Augustine affirms that

Jesus "beats" the devil at "the justice game." For example, Augustine can write: "Yet in being slain in his

innocence by the wicked one, who was acting against us as it were with just rights, he won the case

against him with the justest of all rights, and thus 'led captive the captivity' (Eph 4:8, Ps 68:19) that was

instituted for sin, and delivered us from the captivity we justly endured for sin, and by his just blood

unjustly shed *cancelled the I.O.U.* (Col 2:14) of death, and justified and redeemed sinners."¹⁸ We will return

to this notion of beating the devil at "the justice game" when we look at Book XIII.

Augustine summarizes his understanding: "By his death he offered for us the one truest possible

sacrifice, and thereby purged, abolished, and destroyed whatever there was of guilt, for which the

principalties and powers had a right to hold us bound to payment of the penalty, and by his resurrection

¹⁶ This note from Hill is found in his "Introductory Essay on Book IV" in *De trin.*, 149.

¹⁷ *De trin.*, IV.4.

¹⁸ *De trin.*, IV.17.

he called to new life us who were predestined, justified us who were called, glorified us who were justified.¹⁹ So, Christ's work on the cross is seen as a victory over the evil one.

It is particularly important to note that in Book IV Augustine makes a type of anti-platonic or anti-neoplatonic polemic—all in the context of discussing the atonement. In short, while certain persons (certain Platonists and Neoplatonists) believe one can "return" to the "One" or to "god" through the effort of one's will, Augustine is quite adamant that one can ultimately "return" to God or see God through what God has done in sending His Son, and through the death of His Son. As Augustine writes: "we were incapable of grasping eternal things, and weighed down by the accumulated dirt of our sins, which we had collected by our love of temporal things, and which had become almost a natural growth on our mortal stock; so we needed purifying. But we could only be purified for adaptation to eternal things by temporal means like those we were already bound to in a servile adaptation."²⁰ And he continues: "So now we accord faith to the things done in time for our sakes, and are purified by it; in order that when we come to sight and truth succeeds to faith, eternity might likewise succeed to mortality."²¹ Finally, "Nor, on the other hand, could we pass from being among the things that originated to eternal things, unless the eternal allied himself to us in our originated condition, and so provided us with a bridge to his eternity."²²

Finally, in Book IV Augustine argues that although the Son is sent by the Father, this does not imply that the Son is *less than* the Father. Likewise, although the Holy Spirit is sent by the Father and the Son, this does not imply that the Holy Spirit is *less than* the Father and/or Son. The reason Scripture mentions such "sendings" (it seems, according to Augustine) is due to "the created visible manifestation of the Son and the Holy Spirit." That is—and this is something Augustine will return to—the *temporal*

sendings reflect the *eternal* processions. Likewise, the temporal sendings remind us that "the Father is the source and origin of all deity."²³

BOOKS V, VI, VII

Books V, VI, and VII form a unit of sorts, and we will treat them as such. We will not linger here as long as we might, for there is really one main *conundrum* which Augustine answers here, and it can be summarized fairly quickly.

Edmund Hill puts these three books under the title of "Linguistic and Logical," which is fair

enough. We summarize them briefly. The Arian challenge is in the background of this book, and

Augustine broaches a potential snafu in the orthodox or Nicene position. The potential snafu is due to

Paul's comment in 1 Cor. 1:24: "Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." Augustine argues that when we speak of most things, we can speak in terms of "accident" words and "substance" words. That

is, attributes of a thing that—we might say—"come and go" are "accident" words. Attributes that a thing

always has, and without which they simply would not be that particular thing would be called

"substance" words. Augustine's contention is that *any time we speak of what God is we are using*

"substance" words. That is, we should not say simply that God does good things or even simply that God is good. Rather, it is more accurate to say that God is His goodness. In short, *words that speak of God*

are ultimately substance words. Lying behind this is of course traditional theological commitments: God

is immutable, God is complete, and God is all of his attributes all of the time.

But when we speak of "Father," "Son," and "Holy Spirit," these are "relationship" words. This is

not to deny that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are each God, but rather to say that the Father is not the

Son, the Son is not the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is not the Father.

The *conundrum* comes with Paul's comment regarding "Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1:24). Paul appears to use what seem to be "substance words"—power and wisdom,

which would mean power and wisdom constitute the divine substance, and apply it only to a particular person. How can this be. Augustine's solution, after a rather tortured and circuitous route, is to maintain that words used of the divine substance are indeed "substance words." And also, words which are "substance words" can be applied to a particular person. However, to use a substance word in reference to a particular person does *not* mean that that person *only* is properly spoken of with this or that particular "substance word." For indeed, any true "substance word" would apply equally to each person, ultimately.

BOOK VIII

Book VIII marks a shift in focus in *De Trinitate*. As Edmund Hill sees it there is a key "double movement" at the heart of *De Trinitate*. Augustine began Book I by emphasizing that the starting point of an exploration of the Trinity must be faith. Hence, faith is the starting point. But in Book VIII Augustine asks the kind of question that eventually must emerge: how do I *know* what I am believing or having faith in. That is, *can* one really start with simply "faith." Faith in *what*? Is not *some* "knowledge" necessary to even get things going?

Augustine argues that since we can see "truth" (in an abstract sense), we can see God—since God is the truth (chapter 1). Likewise, since we can see "good" itself, we can see God—since God is the good (chapter 2). But to truly know something is to love (or, we might say, with Augustine, to know it *through* loving it). But, if we know something by loving it, do not we still have to have *some* knowledge of something if we are going to love it all in the first place? As Augustine writes:

For since 'we are still walking by faith and not by sight' (2 Cor 5:7) we do not yet see God, as the same apostle says, 'face to face' (1 Cor 13:12). Yet unless we love him even now, we shall never see him. But who can love what he does not know? Something can be known and not loved; what I am asking is whether something can be loved withi is unknown, because if it cannot then no one loves God before he knows him. And what does knowing God mean but

beholding him and firmly grasping him with the mind? For he is not a body to be examined with the eyes in your head.²⁴

Indeed, "since we must believe before we can understand, . . . How then are we to love by believing this trinity which we do not know?"²⁵ A partial answer is provided simply by the reality of faith. We at first "love by faith," but this is only a partial answer, as Augustine sees it.²⁶

We get a sense of Augustine is heading when he suggests that we are able to love "the just man" because we can see "in" ourselves a sense of justice. That is, Augustine turns inward, into the human person.²⁷

But it is important to note the move Augustine makes at this point in the argument, and I might be forgiven if even Augustine himself grasped what was happening as he made his argument. Augustine has thus far in Book VIII working through an apparent conundrum: we are (1) to begin with faith and then seek to understand from that point, but it is also the case that (2) we cannot love what we do not—at least to some degree—know. So how do we get started? If we were to finish the rest of Book VIII ourselves, and try to connect it thematically to the rest of *De Trinitate*, we might write something like the following: we do have to have *some knowledge* of what we are going to love (even though at another level we start with *faith* and move to *understanding*). But, since God is love, and since we can get a glimpse of what love is by looking within ourselves, let us look within ourselves for glimpses or vestiges of how we are marked or shaped as persons who love in a trinitarian way. Now, such an ending to Book VIII would be "fair enough," and would somewhat jibe with the rest of *De Trinitate*. But something would be missing, and this is not exactly what Augustine does in closing portions of Book VIII.

Rather, Augustine begins to meditate on the link between loving neighbor and loving God. Hear what he says in VIII.12. Augustine references 1 Jn 4:8: "Whoever, you see, does not love his brother is not in love, and whoever is not in love is not in God, because 'God is love' (1 Jn 4:8). Accordingly whoever is

not in God is not in light, because 'God is light and there is no darkness in him (1 Jn 1:5).'" Then Augustine makes an interesting comment: "Is it surprising then that a man who is not in light should not see light, that is not see God, because he is in darkness? Now he sees his brother with ordinary human vision which God cannot be seen by. But if he were to love with spiritual charity the one he sees with human vision, he would see God who is charity with the inner vision which he can be seen by."²⁸ Indeed, "How therefore can the man who does not love the brother he sees love God, whom he does not see for the reason that God is the love which he lacks by not loving his brother?"²⁹

What is fascinating, is that Augustine has turned the *epistemological* issue or *conundrum* into fundamentally a *moral* issue. Or, we might say, he says the *epistemological* issue as fundamentally a *moral* issue. Interestingly, just when we expect Augustine to say, "So look inside, let's make this 'interior move', and in discovering love we have a means to know God, therefore believe him and therefore press on to further understanding," Augustine raises the question of the human will and the link between loving neighbor and loving God.

To put this plainly: a key reason why someone cannot know or see God is because he does not love his neighbor. To truly know or see God requires a changed will or heart (and thereby *of course* one would love his brother). Augustine will return to the fractured nature of the human situation soon enough, but it is worth noting that the *epistemological* *conundrum* is compounded—to say the least—by *moral* problem of man's disordered loves. And indeed, as Augustine writes, it is as our wills are changed, that we learn to truly love, that we learn to truly see God: "the more brightly burns our love for God, the more surely and serenely we see him . . ."³⁰

Finally, Augustine ends Book VIII by asserting that for those who have eyes to see close look at love does indeed reveal a Trinitarian pattern. With love we can see the lover, what is being loved, and

love.³¹

BOOKS IX, X, XI

It is undoubtedly the case that the “inward turn” initiated somewhat in Book VIII continues now

in Books IX, X, and XI.

Book IX

In Book IX Augustine picks up with the triad of lover, loved love. Concentrating on the human

mind (*mens*), Augustine progresses to the triad of mind, its knowledge of itself, and its love of itself (*mens*,

notitia sui, amor sui).³²

Augustine proceeds to explore the nature of knowledge that the mind has, and suggests that the

mind's knowledge can be thought of as a “mental word” (*verbum mentis*). Here the mind's knowledge of

itself is linked with the Son, and Augustine *then* asks if the mind's love of itself might not also be called a

“word”. This of course how Augustine raises the question of the difference between the Son and the Holy

Spirit. Augustine sees the Son as correlating to *knowledge* and the Holy Spirit correlating to *love*.

Knowledge (or image) is begotten or conceived (again the Son is in view), but love should not be spoken

of as begotten or conceived. His answer—as Edmund Hill suggests—may or may not convince.

Augustine's answer is that love is “a kind of finding out what is said to be brought forth or brought to

light, which is often preceded by an inquisitiveness that is going to rest in that end.”³³ That is love is not

begotten but rather *proceeds*—and of course “proceed” is traditional language for the Holy Spirit, which

³¹ *De trin.*, VIII.14.

³² Chapter One of Book IX of *De trin.*

³³ *De trin.*, IX.18.

Augustine adopts. Augustine will spend the rest of *De Trinitate* wrestling with how best to speak of the Holy Spirit.

Book X

Augustine carries on this line of thinking in Book X. Augustine continues to explore the notion of mind's knowledge and love of itself. Augustine discourses a bit on the mind *loving*, and suggests that the mind's act of loving is a kind of "studious love," or the kind of love a student has. That is, there is a hunger for love for learning, and one *loves* what one is trying to know, or what one already knows in a basic way. But what about the mind *knowing* itself. Augustine contends that there is a difference between the

mind *actively* knowing itself (or we might say, *reflecting upon* itself) and the mind having knowledge of itself. That is, the human mind can have all sorts of knowledge, but we tend to focus, or reflect upon, or intentionally think upon only certain things (or a certain thing) at any given time.

Augustine then argues that due to our fallen and fractured state we do not truly know (or love) ourselves as we ought. That is, the mind does not properly know and love itself. We see here Augustine raising an important issue, the fallenness and sinfulness of man—the remedy for which has been

broached back in Book IV, and will be dealt with at length in Book XIII.

While there a number of mental acts that Augustine might latch on to, he ends up—at the end of Book X—with "memory," "understanding," and "will." And this triad—even though he will travel an often circuitous route to get there—will end up proving the heart of his Trinitarian understanding.

Book XI

Augustine makes an interesting move in Book XI, moving to "lesser" analogies of the Trinity, most of which will be set aside by the end of Book XI, as he prepares to shift gears again for Books XII-XIV. As Augustine writes: "No one will doubt that just as the inner man is endowed with understanding, so is the

outer man with sensation. Let us try then if we can to pick out some trace of trinity in this outer man too." And Augustine is aware that this look at the "outer man" is problematic: "As best we can then look for some model of the trinity in this man who is decaying; even if it is not a more accurate model, it may perhaps be easier to distinguish."³⁴

In chapters 2-8 of Book XI Augustine explores two analogies that are more "outer man" analogies. The first one is as follows:

Analogy 1: Chapters 2-5 (more "outer")		Analogy 2: Chapters 6-8 (a bit more "inward")	
Type of Analogy: Seeing	The "Seeing Analogy" Simplified	The body which is seen	The attention of the mind
The appearance or look or visibility of the object in itself	The actual sight	The intention of joining the two together	The intention of the will
The form or likeness of it impressed on the sense of sight.	The deliberate intention or act of will that fixes the sense of sight on the object		

Augustine notes that there is a link between this more "outward" trinity (rooted in sight), and the more "inward" (but not yet fully inward) trinity.

Augustine concludes that while it has been instructive to reflect on this "outward" trinity and on this somewhat more "inward" Trinity, it is time to turn "inwards" more thoroughly. He writes:

"But now to conclude, I have demonstrated as best I could and to whom I could that the will which couples together visible thing and sight as quasi-parent and quasi-offspring, whether in sensation or in thought, cannot itself be called either parent or offspring."³⁵ Translation: the Holy Spirit (here spoken of as "will") is neither "parent" (the Father) or "offspring" (Son). Augustine is already wrestling with how to distinguish the persons, something which will exercise him all throughout *De Trinitate*.

³⁴ *De trin.*, XI.1.
³⁵ *De trin.*, XI.18.

In Books XII, XIII, and XIV Augustine moves in earnest into the “interior man” to look for the

Trinity.

Book XII

Interestingly, Augustine affirms that there is a higher function of the mind (concerned with

contemplating eternal truth) and a lower function of the mind (concerned with day-to-day mundane

things). However, if when we turn inward into the human mind we must seek the Trinity in the *entire*

mind, not just part of it. Augustine qualifies this, however, in that it is most appropriate to speak of the

imago Dei as residing in the higher function of the human mind, not the lower. As Augustine writes: “only

in that part which is concerned with the contemplation of eternal things can one find something that is

not only a trinity but also the image of God, while in the part that is drawn off for temporal activity one

may perhaps find a trinity, but certainly not the image of God.”³⁶

Augustine wrestles with the question of the first woman, and what Paul teaches in I Cor. 11:7 on

the status of the woman as bearing the image of God (or not), but this is largely as a means to refute the

idea that the man, a woman, and a child is a good analogy for the Trinity. He argues it is not.

We begin to see hints of where Augustine is headed. If we were unencumbered by sin, we would

appropriately and fully have our minds set on divine and heavenly things. But because of our fallenness

we are distracted, and our minds wander. As we wander, and fail to direct our gaze to God we actually

become—in a sense—less human: “so the careless glide little by little along the slipper path of failure, and

beginning from a distorted appetite for being like God they end up by becoming beasts. . . . For man’s

true honor is God’s image and likeness in him, but it can only be preserved when facing him from whom
its impression is received.”³⁷ After a brief discussion of “wisdom” (*sapientia*)—the “higher” knowledge of

³⁶ *De trin.*, XII.4.
³⁷ *De trin.*, XII.16.

eternal things and “knowledge” (*scientia*)—the “lower” knowledge of temporal things, Augustine pushes further discussion of the Trinity to Book XIII, to which we now turn.

Book XIII

Faith, and ultimately the atoning work of Christ, are central to Book XIII. Faith is central, and is something found “deep inside us,” in Augustine’s words.³⁸ Augustine discusses the notion that there is a commonality to all persons, and it is the will to be happy. Augustine takes this as virtually self-evident, and ends up arguing that for this will to be happy to be fulfilled, faith is required. And of course this desire for happiness is corrupted and encumbered by disordered loves. As Augustine writes: “neither the man who has not got what he wants nor the man who has got what he is wrong to want is happy, but only the man who both has the good things he wants and does not want any bad things. . . . For the man who rightly wants whatever he wants is near to being happy, and when he gets them he will be happy.”³⁹ But while faith is required for happiness, this happiness is ultimately not found in this life. Hence, a future is necessary, and the ultimate fulfillment of our happiness is linked to the reality of the incarnation and atoning death of Jesus.⁴⁰ For it is in Christ’s atoning death that the justice of God prevails over the power of the devil.

It would be a mistake to simply see Augustine’s “theory” of the atonement as one of “Christus

Victor.” Jesus certainly conquers the evil one. However, Augustine sees the victory over the devil

fundamentally in terms of *justice*. That is, the devil’s influence over persons, and the *reason* the devil has

such influence, is fundamentally a *justice* issue. The devil, for Augustine, must be defeated in terms of

justice.⁴¹ Augustine can write: “So it pleased God to deliver man from the devil’s authority by beating him

³⁸ *De trin.*, XIII.5.

³⁹ *De trin.*, XIII.9.

⁴⁰ *De trin.*, XIII.10-12.

⁴¹ For an excellent treatment of the relationship between the “*christus victor*” understanding and the

substitutionary/satisfaction understanding of the atonement, see Henri Blocher, “*Agnus Victor*: The Atonement as Victory and Vicarious Punishment,” in *What Does it Mean To Be Saved? Broadening Evangelical Horizons on Salvation*, ed. John G. Stackhouse, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002).

at the justice game, not the power game, so that men too might imitate Christ by seeking to beat the devil at the justice game, not the power game.⁴² But how is this so? We noted earlier that while Augustine says clearly that Christ paid our debts, the idea of payment to the devil is not prominent. Rather, payment appears to fit under the rubric of justice. Augustine asks, "What then is the justice that overpowered the devil?" His answer: "The justice of Jesus Christ—what else?"⁴³

The distinction between "wisdom" (*sapientia*) and "knowledge" (*scientia*) is raised again at the end of Book XIII. And Augustine explains something of his logic thus far. He has taken the time to explore to some degree the Trinity in the "outer man," but he has done so "in order by training the mind at these lower levels to come in our own small measure to a sight of that trinity which God is, at least in a puzzle and in a mirror, if of course we can manage even this much."⁴⁴

But—and we are almost at Book XIV!—Augustine is clear that we have not fully and thoroughly moved into the inner man yet. He does come back to the triad of memory, understanding will,⁴⁵ but he claims not to truly have explored the *imago dei* yet, and a further exploration must await Book XIV.

Book XIV

As Augustine moves into the second-to-last book of *De Trinitate* he reminds the reader of what he has said about faith thus far. While faith is a sense a *temporal* thing, it is an essential means of acquiring, or arriving at *eternal* things. Indeed it is through faith in a thoroughly temporal, earthy, and indeed bloody reality—the gospel itself, Jesus Christ crucified and risen—that we are brought to the knowledge and contemplation of eternal things. And finally, Augustine notes that it is through a certain way of living now—certain virtues and a certain way of life now—that we are led to the contemplation of eternal things. Indeed, "the very virtues by which one lives sagaciously, courageously, moderately, and justly in

⁴² *The Trinity* XIII.17.

⁴³ *The Trinity* XIII.18. Parts of this section appeared in my monograph *Colin Gunton and the Failure of Augustine: The Theology of Colin Gunton in Light of Augustine* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011).

⁴⁴ *De trin.*, XIII.26.

⁴⁵ *De trin.*, XIII.26.

this time of mortality must be related to this faith which though temporal itself leads to eternity, or they will not be true virtues.”⁴⁶

But as important as faith is, we do not really get to a conception of the trinity through reflecting on such faith. This is because faith is *temporal*, and is the means by which we will one day arrive at *sight*. In short, *faith is temporal*, while *sight* (the one day, face-to-face vision of God) is *eternal*. Thus, we must find something else. Remember, Augustine sees the most central and important aspect of man as being the image of God. And he correlates “finding” an adequate construal of the trinity with the *imago dei*, which is everlasting. So Augustine—still—must continue to turn inward.

Augustine returns to a key analogy from Book X: the mind remembering, understanding, and willing or loving itself. And it is key to remember that for Augustine it is not simply the possession of a mental *faculty* which allows the image of God to be realized. It is the mind *engaged in certain activities* which allows the image of God to be realized.

It appears that Augustine has arrived at his goal: the image of God is realized, we get the best glimpse of the Trinity, when we land upon the notion of the mind remembering, understanding, and loving itself. Augustine writes: “Here we are then with the mind remembering itself, understanding itself, loving itself. If we see this we see at trinity, not yet God of course, but already the image of God.”⁴⁷ One of the key reasons Augustine lands here is because the mind—like God—is co-eternal with its remembering, understanding, and loving itself. That is, as soon as the mind came to be, we can say it was engaged in remembering, understanding and loving itself.

Then in a fascinating twist Augustine advances the argument. The best analogy is *not* the mind remembering, understanding and loving *itself*, but the mind remembering, understanding, and loving *God*.⁴⁸ Indeed: “This trinity of the mind is not really the image of God because the mind remembers and understands and loves itself, but because it is also able to remember and love him by

whom it was made. And when it does this it becomes wise. If it does not do it, then even though it remembers and understands and loves itself, it is foolish.”⁴⁹ Here we are getting to the heart of the matter: “Let it then remember its God to whose image it was made, and understand and love him. To put it in a word, let it worship the uncreated God, by whom it was created with a capacity for him and able to share in him.”⁵⁰

And at the end of Book XIV Augustine turns explicitly to the fact that the image is somewhat defaced, and is need of reconstruction and reforming and renovated. And now we see more fully why Augustine’s “excurses” on the atonement in Books IV and XIII were *central* and not *peripheral* to the argument. We need to be reformed and renovated if the image is going to be fully restored in us, and if we are going to one day truly see God face-to-face—as Paul speaks about in 1 Cor. 13:12.

Augustine writes that “this renewal and reforming of the mind takes place according to God or according to the image of God,” for “this renewal takes place in the *thin* in which the image of God is to be found, that is in the mind.”⁵¹ Augustine continues: “so then the man who is being renewed in the recognition of God and in justice and holiness of truth by making progress day by day, is transferring his love from temporal things to eternal, from visible to intelligible, from carnal to spiritual things; he is industriously applying himself to checking and lessening his greed for the one sort and binding himself with charity to the other. But his success in this depends on divine assistance; it is after all God who declares, ‘Without me you can do nothing (In 15:5).’”⁵²

And then Augustine links his argument explicitly to the mediation of Christ: “When the last day of life overtakes someone who has kept faith in the mediator, making steady progress of this sort, he will be received by the holy angels to be led into the presence of the God he has worshiped and to be perfected by him and so to get his body back again at the end of the world, not for punishment but for glory. For

⁴⁹ *De trin.*, XIV.15.
⁵⁰ *De trin.*, XIV.15.
⁵¹ *De trin.*, XIV.22.
⁵² *De trin.*, XIV.23.

only when it comes to the perfect vision of God will this image bear God's perfect likeness."⁵³ In short, while Augustine has made an "inward" move to try and discover the Trinity in the image of God in man, it is in fact the case that the image must be healed, renewed and renovated, and will only achieve its "full likeness of him when it attains to the full vision of him. . . ."⁵⁴

BOOK XV

Book XV is somewhat anti-climactic after the development and build-up of the first fourteen books. Augustine helpfully summarizes the entire treatise thus far. Augustine affirms that we can know something of eternal things through looking at creation, but we don't necessarily find knowledge of the Trinity through looking at the created order.⁵⁵

Interestingly, having spent fourteen books building up to an affirmation of how the human mind is the image of God, Augustine nonetheless asserts that we only have an enigmatic grasp of the Trinity through looking at the human mind, and at the image of God in the human mind.⁵⁶ Particularly

problematic for Augustine—at the end of Book XVI—is the nature of the Holy Spirit's procession from the Father and Son. He does helpfully note that while he has used certain words to describe certain persons: the Father as *memory*, the Son as *understanding*, and the Holy Spirit as *love*—obviously each person can in some sense be spoken of as engaging in all three activities.⁵⁷

Finally, Augustine notes that as enigmatic as the Trinity found in the image of God, it is still worthy of attention, and has some value. We only get a small glimpse now, in keeping with Paul's teaching in 1 Cor. 13:12. But nonetheless, we get a glimpse.

⁵³ *De trin.*, XIV.23. My emphasis.
⁵⁴ *De trin.*, XIV.24.
⁵⁵ *De trin.*, XIV.6-13.
⁵⁶ *De trin.*, XIV.14-26.
⁵⁷ *De trin.*, XIV.28.

Interpretive Insights, and Key Theological Principles

In the brief time we have remaining, allow me to summarize what I think are the key interpretive insights or central theological principles in *De Trinitate*.

1. First, Augustine already accepts the doctrine of the Trinity due to Scripture and tradition, and hence is trying to explicate what is already believed by faith. Now, as we have seen, the starting point of faith leads one to ask how one can believe what one does not know—and this line of thought exercises Augustine at some length. But nonetheless, it is essential to grasp that the Trinity is something Augustine already affirms, and the task of *De Trinitate*—in part—is to explicate what is already believed.

2. And this leads to a second point, that Augustine is engaging in an exercise in theological “see” Augustine theologize in front of the reader.
- what Augustine is doing in *De Trinitate* is to—in a sense—think and write “out loud,” allowing the reader to sort of follow along, see Augustine work through an analogy or line of thought for a while, set it aside, move on to a new possibility, etc.—all while the reader is almost allowed to

3. Third, it is essential to grasp what is Augustine is saying on the issue of *eternal* processions and *temporal* sendings. Augustine affirms that the Father sent the Son and Spirit in the first-century in a unique way—indeed, in the “fullness of time” (Gal. 4:4). So, it is proper to speak of *temporal* sendings. But since our knowledge of who God is come from how He has acted in history,

Augustine contends that the *temporal* sendings reveal the *eternal* processions. That is, the life of God in the first-century in the sending of the Son and Spirit is reflective of the life of God in eternity. There are a number of ways we could tease this out, but here I simply state the obvious: Augustine clearly believes we can have true—if not exhaustive—knowledge of God, and this knowledge comes to us through very earthly, bodily, historical realities. To say that Augustine

does not give full weight to the persons, or makes God virtually unknowable because of his emphasis on the unity of the Godhead—as some Augustine critics are prone to say—seems to significantly miss the mark.

4. Fourth, it is essential to grasp the way in which the eschatological or end-of-time face-to-face

vision functions in *De Trinitate*. Early on Augustine turns to 1 Cor. 13:12, where Paul says: “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.” It is this future face-to-face vision of God which animates and

informs Augustine through *De Trinitate*. It is as if Augustine is saying, “I know that God is a Trinity. I also know that Scripture teaches that I will one day see this God face-to-face. What is this God going to be like that I one day see face-to-face?” The fact that all Christians are headed to this face-to-face vision, and that we must somehow be *ready* for such an encounter raises other issues—to wit, what does it take to really arrive at such a vision, and how what needs to take

place for one to arrive there?

5. And this leads to a fifth key issue in *De Trinitate*—the issue of the incarnation and atoning work of

Christ. If someone simply picks up *De Trinitate* and peruses through a bit, and notices that Books IV and XIII deal at with some length with the cross of Christ, it would understandable if the reader concluded that Augustine was simply, or apparently, engaging in an off-topic digression. But this would be a serious mistake. Given that Augustine is concerned with our future face-to-face

vision, and how one attains such a vision, he is arguing that the only way we will ever see God face-to-face if the Son enters the world, dies for us, and then if through faith we are joined to

Christ who ultimately *brings* us to the face-to-face vision. In short, for Augustine the human mind is so weighed down with sin that we would never be able to look upon God apart from the

cleansing that the cross of Christ brings. Thus, in Augustine we have a radically gospel/cross-

centered view of how we approach God. We can only see God when God comes to us, cleanses us with the blood of his Son, and brings us to the vision of God.

6. And this raises a sixth key point. *De Trinitate* is—at least in part—a polemical work. Augustine at a number of points (particularly Books IV and XIII) is adamant that no one attains to this face-to-face vision apart from the atoning work of Christ. Augustine's opponents appear to be either

Platonists or Neo-platonists—those persons who would argue that we do or *can* “return” to God (or to the “One” in Neo-platonist terms) apart from the sacrificial death of Jesus. While one might argue that Augustine never fully extricated himself from his Neo-platonist past, it is

nonetheless the case that as his thought developed, and as his thought came to be expressed in mature works like *De Trinitate*, he was quite clearly offering a radically different understanding of redemption than found in the Neo-platonists. Augustine uses the imagery of a man separated from his homeland by large body of water. While the man can try and gaze upon his homeland from afar, he will never actually arrive at the homeland unless he climbs on the wood which can take him there—and in context the “wood” in view is the cross of Christ, the only means by

which one can truly see God.

7. Seventh, and flowing from what has just been argued, it is essential to grasp the way in which the *imago dei* must be renewed and renovated if one is going to see God face-to-face. Or put slightly differently, how the ultimate renewal and renovation of the *imago Dei* in the mind is perfected with the face-to-face vision of God. And here we see again how Augustine's treatment of the atoning work of Christ in Books IV and XIII are so central. By faith we are forgiven for our sins, on the basis of what Christ has done. And then we begin to be transformed, and this ultimate

transformation will not be complete until we see God face-to-face. Thus, while Augustine turns “inward” into the human mind as the most likely place to “find” the Trinitarian image of God, one must turn “outward” in the sense of recognize, believe, and benefit from a very “outward,” earthy, bloody reality—the cross of Christ—if one is going to truly see God and if this Trinitarian image in the mind—which we have been exploring all throughout *De Trinitate* is to be unfractured and

healed. And again—the atonement is so central because it is only through the atoning work of Christ that we can be healed and cleansed and changed—and hence be “fitted” for the face-to-face vision.

Conclusion

There are many more things that could be said—the relationship between wisdom and knowledge, how the various analogies work or do not work, why Augustine struggles with the procession of the Holy Spirit—all the way to the end of the book. We have here simply offered a brief outline of *De Trinitate*, and tried to locate and identify the key theological and interpretive insights. But hopefully with such interpretive and theological insights as we have outlined above in view, we might be a tad better prepared to benefit from this central text from the Doctor of Grace.

Hill suggests, then, that the double movement is as follows:

(A) "movement from [1] loving by believing to understanding in loving", and

(B) "a movement 'in a more inward fashion' from [1] knowing by loving to [2] loving by believing

now immeasurable deepened and matured."⁵⁸