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# Augustine's Educational Theories and Practices and Church Education Today

By Mary Mwangi

## Abstract

*This paper examines Augustine's educational views and practices to discover how these might impact the modern church's educational ministries. First, is a brief biography of his life, including his early years and conversion. Next is an overview of the context in which he ministered that gives insight into the reasons for some of his views. The bulk of the paper discusses his views and practices in his educational work as a catechist. The last portion reflects on what we can gain from these observations, and how they might influence education of believers today.*

## Introduction

In Biblical history God gave the ability to teach and inspire faith in Him to men like Abraham, Moses, Samuel, David, Daniel, Paul. The history of the early church includes the contributions of Tertullian, Origen, Ambrose, Cyril, and John Chrysostom to the development of the church. These leaders influenced doctrine in varying degrees, not only in their lifetime but also in subsequent generations.

Augustine of Hippo (354-430) rose a step higher than many great church leaders of the patristic period. He is mentioned almost without fail anytime church history in the fourth century onwards is discussed. He is described as a great church teacher,<sup>1</sup> the greatest Latin father,<sup>2</sup> the greatest thinker of the post-Nicene Christian fathers,<sup>3</sup> one of the leading Western church fathers as well as one of the most learned, noble, and acclaimed leaders of the early church,<sup>4</sup> one of the most creative minds in the history of Christian theology,<sup>5</sup> the greatest Latin theologian, and the towering figure of Christendom's first 750 years.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Prolegomena: St. Augustine's Life and Work," in *The Confessions and Letters of St. Augustine, With a Sketch of His Life and Work*, vol. 1 of *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph F. Kelly, *The World of the Early Christians: Message of the Fathers of the Church*, (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1997), 200.

<sup>3</sup> James A. Davies, "Augustine," in *The Evangelical Dictionary of Christian Education*, ed. Michael J. Anthony (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 58.

<sup>4</sup> Michael J. Anthony and Warren S. Benson, *Exploring the History & Philosophy of Christian Education: Principles for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2003), 117.

<sup>5</sup> Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1985), 339.

<sup>6</sup> Gordon R., Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, vol.1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 49.

Augustine spent most of his adult life as a catechist and wrote extensively about what he taught and thought about the Christian faith. These writings were momentous enough to impact the teaching ministry of the church in his day and in succeeding generations.<sup>7</sup> Harmless, for example, holds that Augustine's treatise *On Catechizing the Uninstructed* "has helped to shape the pedagogy and programs of influential Christian educators ... again and again, educators have been struck by Augustine's pedagogical acumen and psychological sensitivity."<sup>8</sup>

## Background

Augustine was born in 354 in Thagaste, North Africa, to his pagan father, Patricius, and Christian mother, Monica. He had a brother and two sisters. He was educated in grammar and rhetoric, and studied law in Carthage. In his early career he taught rhetoric at Carthage, Rome, and Milan. He was brought up as a Christian, and was enrolled as a catechumen while a child. At the age of nineteen, in his quest for knowledge, he joined the proscribed sect of the Manichees, "a gnostic sect that promised great wisdom to its followers."<sup>9</sup> He was teaching in Milan when he was exposed to the teaching of Ambrose, bishop of Milan, which precipitated his conversion to Christianity in 386. Schaff writes a beautiful description of this conversion. It "made him an incalculable blessing to the whole Christian world, and brought even the sins and errors of his youth into the service of the truth," and "if ever there was a thorough and fruitful conversion, next to that of Paul on the way to Damascus, it was that of Augustine."<sup>10</sup>

Ambrose baptized Augustine in Milan in 387, in the company of his friend Alypius and his natural son Adeodatus. Shortly after, while on their journey back home, his beloved mother, Monica died on the way to Ostia. On arriving back in Africa, he spent three years in contemplative and literary retreat. Against his will, but in submission to the voice of the people and the will of God, he was ordained as a priest in 391 and became bishop of Hippo in 395, where he succeeded bishop Valerius in 396. He served in the position of bishop of Hippo until his death at the age of seventy-six, in 430. Out of his humble monastic community went forth ten bishops and many lower clergy. Also, he left a rich library that he donated to the church. His writings not only impacted the church, but also

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<sup>7</sup> Davies, "Augustine," 58; Schaff, "Prolegomena: St. Augustine's Life and Work," 3; Harold W. Burgess, *Models of Religious Education: Theory and Practice in Historical and Contemporary Perspective* (Nappanee, IN: Evangel Publishing House, 2001), 41-42.

<sup>8</sup> William Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenate*, (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1995), 108.

<sup>9</sup> Anthony and Benson, *Exploring the History & Philosophy of CE*, 117.

<sup>10</sup> Schaff, "Prolegomena: St. Augustine's Life and Work," 4.

Western philosophical and psychological thought.<sup>11</sup> It is worth noting that, "in many conflicts, including the Reformation, both sides could claim his patronage, appealing to selected facets of his ever-shifting mind."<sup>12</sup> Erickson asserts that Augustine "developed a synthesis of Platonic philosophy and theology (*The City of God*) which in many ways dominated theology for more than eight hundred years."<sup>13</sup>

### **The Context of the Church in the Fourth Century**

In the fourth and fifth centuries, the church experienced major shifts both within and in regard to the surrounding culture. First, the church ceased being a minority group persecuted and maligned by the state. Beginning with Constantine's reign in 306, the church enjoyed state protection, could own properties, provided support for the poor and underprivileged, and its bishops were given various community responsibilities. Church proselytizing was unrestrained.

Second, many people sought association with the church, not because they had experienced conversion, but because the publicity, state favors and support, and the atmosphere of general goodwill attracted many people from every social strata to the church. But the large numbers of "converts" presented a problem for the clergy. They were unclear about how to process their admission into the church. Previously, admission into the church was consciously and systematically done, culminating in baptism. It took two to three years of concerted instruction and severe scrutiny, and admission was generally restricted to adults, or those who had reached the age of discretion. But in time, Christian parents enrolled their children as catechumens. The following is Dujarier's perception:

The situation had certainly changed with respect to the preceding century. If, despite the great amount of patristic literature we have from the fourth century, we have so few witnesses to a serious admission examination for the catechumenate, it is because, from this time on, the rite was conferred too readily. It was used as a lure, while it should have sanctioned a conversion!<sup>14</sup>

However, the period of faith formation was reinvented as the Lent - when pre-baptismal instruction was provided.

Third, doctrinal disputes multiplied so catechists devoted much time and care to address doctrinal issues.<sup>15</sup> Also, this century marked the

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<sup>11</sup> "St. Augustine of Hippo," in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. F. L. Cross, E. A. Livingstone (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 108-110.

<sup>12</sup> D. F. Wright, "Augustine of Hippo," in *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. J. D. Douglas (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 88.

<sup>13</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 60.

<sup>14</sup> Michel Dujarier, *A History of the Catechumenate: The First Six Centuries* (New York: Sadlier, 1979), 94.

<sup>15</sup> Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenate*, 54.

beginning of councils to deliberate on universal doctrinal matters affecting the church, the first being the council of Nicaea in 325.

Four, there was a marked increase in the number of well-educated Christian thinkers who gave of themselves to teach catechumens and neophytes. The Fourth century especially was marked by a significant theological and intellectual force: Hilary of Poitiers (ca. 315-365) on the Trinity; Ambrose of Milan's exegetical work on the church; Jerome's (ca. 342-420) Latin translation of the Bible and composition of commentaries; Sulpicius Severus' (ca. 360-425) monastic manifesto; Paulinus of Nola (ca. 353-431) religious poetry; and then there is Augustine who began his Christian literary work in the 380s.<sup>16</sup> The teachings of heretics also became widespread. The Donatists, the Manichees, and the Pelagians, were but a few who taught false doctrines in Augustine's day. The burden of combating heresies weighed heavily upon those engaged in biblical teaching.<sup>17</sup>

Five, in regard to spiritual sensitivity, when the church grew in influence and wealth those who preached against Christians' attachment to the world became uncomfortable. Some chose to disassociate themselves from the pleasures of the world by retreating from it. This marked the beginning of hermits and monks. Initially individuals went off alone, but by about 320, Pachominus established communal monastic living. This became the preferred way of isolating one's self from the world.

These form the context within which Augustine came to the faith and the ministry of a catechist. Following his ordination, Augustine lived a monastic life in Thagaste. Later he founded a monastery near Hippo. He had to wrestle with how to: (1) admit the many people who flooded the church, (2) provide the teaching to ground both genuine and uncommitted affiliates, (3) address unprecedented doctrinal and heretical issues in an effective manner. This next section highlights some of the positions he developed to be effective as a catechist.

### **Augustine's Views and Practices**

Most of Augustines' views are taken from three of his treatises. (1) *The Enchiridion*, also called the *Handbook*, which he wrote to Laurentius shortly after 420. Laurentius was probably a deacon or layman from Rome who requested a handbook with instructions on worship and doctrine. (2) *On the Catechising of the Uninstructed*. This was a response (ca. 406) to Deogratias, a friend, presbyter, and fellow catechist who asked for

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<sup>16</sup> Kelly, *The World of the Early Christians*, 200.

<sup>17</sup> Augustine, *Enchiridion*, trans. J. F. Shaw, in *New Advent*, ed. Kevin Knight, 2009 ed. (2009a), 4. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1302.htm> (accessed November 8, 2013).

guidance on the best method to catechize the uninstructed. (3) *A Sermon to the Catechumens on the Creed* was part of Augustine's instruction in which he expounded the tenets of the faith contained in the creed.

Augustine viewed the Scriptures as authoritative and as the content to be learnt. He believed and defended the verbal inspiration of canonical Scripture.<sup>18</sup> Augustine said:

I have learnt to yield this respect and honor only to the canonical books of Scripture: of these alone do I most firmly believe that the authors were completely free from error. And if in these writings I am perplexed by anything which appears to me opposed to truth, I do not hesitate to suppose that either the manuscript is faulty, or the translator has not caught the meaning of what was said, or I myself have failed to understand it.<sup>19</sup>

Outler says, "it was in Scriptures that, first and last Augustine found the focus of his religious authority."<sup>20</sup> To do this effectively, Augustine studied the Scriptures routinely<sup>21</sup> for his own edification. He was very conversant with the contents of the Bible. Based on what is known from his writings, sermons, and other interactions, and bearing in mind that he never used sermon notes but spoke from what welled up from his heart following prayer and time in the Word, Harmless says he may have committed most of the Bible to memory.<sup>22</sup> In turn, the Scriptures are what he presented to his students, and Scriptures were the catechumens' textbook. His commitment to the truth in the Scriptures led him to revise his earlier writings to correct any opinions that seemed incorrect when compared with his more mature understanding.<sup>23</sup>

Augustine viewed sermons as a joint inquiry into the Bible, a venture shared by the catechist and his students. He felt he and other catechizers were merely vessels, through whom God ministered, so that students heard God through the catechizer because in essence, the teacher was ultimately God himself. He urged Deogratias, for instance, that when teaching, he should pray that God may speak through him so that the

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<sup>18</sup> Lewis and Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, vol.1, 136.

<sup>19</sup> Augustine, *Letter 82*, trans. J. G. Cunningham, in *New Advent*, ed. Kevin Knight, 2009 ed. (2009d), 1.3. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1102082.htm> (accessed November 10, 2013).

<sup>20</sup> Albert C. Outler, trans. & ed., *Augustine: Confessions and Enchiridion*, vol. 7 of *The Library of Christian Classics* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1955), 13.

<sup>21</sup> Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 431.

<sup>22</sup> Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenate*, 165.

<sup>23</sup> Schaff, "Prolegomena: St. Augustine's Life and Work," 12.



student receives God's message through the human teacher.<sup>24</sup> Augustine was very clear on who was to get the glory should the student begin to notice a change in his moral qualities and knowledge - not the catechist, but God, who loved the catechumen, authored the Word, and spoke it through the catechist.<sup>25</sup>

Augustine valued his students immensely. As they came seeking, whether from genuine or pretentious motivation as was common in his day, Augustine would not turn them away. He always entertained the possibility of influencing the inquirer in the direction of salvation. If the motive of the inquirer was found to be deceitful, Augustine recognized that the catechizer could not know the point at which a true change of heart would take place. Therefore, he advised catechizers to "deal with him [inquirer] in such a manner that this wish may be made to arise within him, even should it not be at present," at the time.<sup>26</sup> The approach was not to be an open attack on nominalism, but in order to isolate the best ministry approach to that person. Closely related was his view of divine involvement which often prompted the inquirers to seek help. Augustine believed that, "very rarely, no, never does it happen that any one comes to us with the desire to become a Christian who has not been struck by some fear of God."<sup>27</sup> He acknowledged that the inquirer may be stirred by either fear of judgment, dreams, or miracles, but behind these God drawing the person to Himself. He felt the role of the catechist was to recognize those events as stepping stones through which the inquirer was to be guided to the more trustworthy foundation for establishing faith, the Scriptures. But Augustine did not believe in basing one's faith on miracles and dreams. He viewed miracles as signs that God used to draw the person's attention, but ultimately, the Scriptures pointed to the more superior pathway, that of hoping in and trusting the invisible. In regard to dreams, he felt a conversion decision was one to be made consciously, not in one's sleep, but based on understanding the Word of God.

Augustine was always cognizant of the possibility of influencing not only the first time inquirers, but also the unconverted who mixed with the believers in church activities. Such people often had ulterior motives such as gaining favors, or a spouse, or even with the aim of tempting and deceiving the believers. His opinion was that God's purpose was confirming,

the faith and prudence of the elect by means of perverseness of these others while at the same time He also takes account of the fact that many

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<sup>24</sup> Augustine, *On Catechizing of the Uninstructed*, trans. S. D. F. Salmond, in *New Advent*, ed. Kevin Knight, 2009 ed. (2009b), 11.16.

<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1303.htm> (accessed November 10, 2013).

<sup>25</sup> Augustine, *On Catechizing of the Uninstructed*, 2009b, 7.11.

<sup>26</sup> Augustine, *On Catechizing of the Uninstructed*, 2009b, 5.9.

<sup>27</sup> Augustine, *On Catechizing of the Uninstructed*, 2009b, 5.9.

of their number make an advance, and are converted to the doing of the good pleasure of God with a great impetus, when led to take pity upon their own souls. ... many are brought by the same patience of the Almighty to the most wholesome pain of repentance. Until that is effected, they are made the means of exercising not only the forbearance, but also the compassion of those who are already holding by the right way.<sup>28</sup>

To Augustine the inquirers' needs came first. Their comfort and comprehension ranked high in his teaching priorities. He instructs Deogratias:

whenever we observe signs of weariness on the part of the hearer, to offer him the liberty of being seated; nay more, we should urge him by all means to sit down, and we ought to drop some remark calculated at once to refresh him and to banish from his mind any anxiety which may have chanced to break in upon him and draw off his attention.<sup>29</sup>

Augustine also terminated his sermons if he sensed genuine fatigue in his hearers.<sup>30</sup> He also believed that the catechist should assess his students' understanding. If a student did not seem to understand what was taught, then he believed "it becomes our duty in our discourse to make trial of all things which may be of any avail in stirring him up and drawing him forth as it were from his place of concealment."<sup>31</sup> His discourses are therefore characterized by different explanations of the same concept, repetitions, and illustrations that use contextual experiences to ensure his students understood what was taught. Augustine recognized that students came from varying backgrounds with different abilities and so needed to be handled according to their individual differences. Those who had a liberal education should to be recognized for what they knew but their knowledge must be assessed so that wrong doctrine would not be affirmed. Those who came with superior abilities in grammar and professional speaking should be instructed on Christian humility and on the need to accommodate those who usually excelled in pursuing holiness, but had less education. On the other hand, the person who came with little or no education must be given a more detailed explanation of the topic under discussion. Relevant approaches prevented beginning students from despising what they were taught.<sup>32</sup> When teaching the underprivileged, the catechist must follow Jesus' example. Jesus emptied himself so he could communicate with human beings.

Augustine taught from a type of curriculum. He did not call it thus but he had a clear idea of the systematic instructions that those who came to the church needed to hear. He held that students should be taught to

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<sup>28</sup> Augustine, *On Catechizing of the Uninstructed*, 2009b, 25.48.

<sup>29</sup> Augustine, *On Catechizing of the Uninstructed*, 2009b, 13.19.

<sup>30</sup> Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenate*, 167.

<sup>31</sup> Augustine, *On Catechizing of the Uninstructed*, 2009b, 13.18.

<sup>32</sup> Augustine, *On Catechizing of the Uninstructed*, 2009b, 9.13.

understand the message of the Bible from creation to the present by focusing on the most significant biblical facts, dwelling on them long enough to “open them out to vision, and present them to the minds of the hearer as things to be examined and admired.”<sup>33</sup> It was important that the seeker understand the pivotal events in world history, and the meanings these events carried. This would focus the students’ energies on what was really important, and also avoid needlessly exhausting or confusing them.

Augustine felt the creed was indispensable in helping *competentes* (baptismal candidates) and the faithful (those already baptized) to combat heresies.<sup>34</sup> To him the creed was a compilation of fundamental elements of biblical faith. These truths should be understood and believed.<sup>35</sup> He started by repeating from memory, and then he taught it to them phrase by phrase, explaining each of the tenets. He also gave additional material for each phrase, so that these phrases served as subheadings in his instruction. His goal was that they understand it well enough to firm up their identity in the orthodox Christian faith and to combat conflicting religious views. He also required the *competentes* to repeat the creed from memory, the test being a week before Easter. The creed should be written on their hearts, not on paper. Students should recite it daily before bed, and before leaving home.<sup>36</sup> Similarly he required the catechumens to memorize and recite the Lord’s Prayer. He vehemently opposed the heretics and their doctrines.<sup>37</sup> Augustine took it upon himself to “save Christianity from the disruption of heresy and the calumnies of the pagan, and, above everything else, to renew and exalt the faithful hearing of the gospel of man’s utter need and God’s abundant grace.”<sup>38</sup>

Augustine had one goal for instruction - love. He was convinced that teacher and student must focus on “the end of the commandment, which is charity.”<sup>39</sup> God sent Jesus so He could show His love through us. For Augustine all teaching should help a person understand how much God loves him so he, in turn, may love God and his fellow man. The process was rigorous enough to lead to a complete paradigm shift. It included forty days of lectures, fasting, abstaining from bathing, meat, and sex, occasional all night prayer vigils, alms giving, putting right previously strained relationships, self-assessment and external scrutiny, memorizing

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<sup>33</sup> Augustine, *On Catechizing of the Uninstructed*, 2009b, 3.5.

<sup>34</sup> Augustine, *Enchiridion*, 2009a, 7.

<sup>35</sup> Augustine, *Enchiridion*, 2009a, 20; Augustine, *A Sermon to Catechumens on the Creed*, trans. H. Browne, in *New Advent*, ed. Kevin Knight, 2009 ed. (2009c), 1. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1307.htm> (accessed November 10, 2013).

<sup>36</sup> Augustine, *A Sermon to Catechumens on the Creed*, 2009c, 1.

<sup>37</sup> R. S. Pine-Coffin, trans., *Saint Augustine Confessions* (New York: Dorset Press, 1961), 20; Schaff, “Prolegomena: St. Augustine’s Life and Work,” 10.

<sup>38</sup> Outler, *Augustine: Confessions and Enchiridion*, 13.

<sup>39</sup> Augustine, *On Catechizing of the Uninstructed*, 2009b, 3.6.

the creed and Lord's Prayer, weeklong exorcism, and eight days of post-baptism instructions. The *competentes* knew this was no simple transition. For Augustine teaching was about bringing transformation in a person's life. He felt effective teaching resulted in the student being moved to the point of altering behavior. When he taught, he explained the content using different tones, illustrations, pleading, and employed any strategy he felt useful, until he was satisfied that even the slowest hearers understood his message enough to go beyond understanding to action. When his hearers cheered, shouted, and applauded, (a characteristic of audiences of that day), Augustine was not distracted; he begged them to turn their cheers into action. He knew "it was easier to win the applause than to form a community that lived in harmony with God's wisdom. He also knew his natural temptation was to glory in the applause."<sup>40</sup>

Augustine gave instruction on the simple and the challenging issues of Christian living. For example, suffering perplexes every generation. There is always a need to define and explain how to deal with the complexities of suffering and still believe in a loving God. Augustine wrestled with the question of suffering. Drawing from the life of Job, he concluded that suffering should be accepted as that which God has approved. It should not be endured as a means to 'bribe' God so as to be blessed nor in hope of receiving a reward. People should note that just because Job's property, health, and children were restored double what he had before, this outcome was totally unknown to Job and nowhere influenced his devotion to God through his suffering.<sup>41</sup> Job's was not a quest for avarice but an immovable patience before God.

Augustine felt the catechumens should be prepared to handle relationships both inside and outside the church. Although state sponsored persecution was by this time non-existent, the believers still experienced opposition from pagans or heretics who challenged their beliefs. The believers should be helped to realize that such persecution was in fulfillment of prophecy, "and to point out of what service temptations are in the training of the faithful, and what relief there is in the example of the patience of God who has resolved to permit them even to the end."<sup>42</sup> He also felt that new inquirers were in danger of being influenced by pseudo-Christians within the church, whom he called scandalous Christians. Such "Christians" loved, defended, recommended, and even persuaded involvement in drunkenness, covetousness, fraud, adultery, fornication, among other vices. Augustine felt catechumens needed to be instructed about the danger of being influenced into passivity by such people. Students should be instructed that tolerating such

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<sup>40</sup> Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenate*, 186.

<sup>41</sup> Augustine, *A Sermon to Catechumens on the Creed*, 2009c, 10.

<sup>42</sup> Augustine, *On Catechizing of the Uninstructed*, 2009b, 7.11.

persons within the church did endorse impunity, but that God's judgment awaited their thoughtless actions. On the other hand, the *competentes* should be made aware that many genuine Christians were also in the church. They would find them if the *competentes* were genuine Christians themselves. He prepared students to relate with others without losing sight of pursuing a closer walk with God.

Augustine cared for the poor. He felt good works included meeting the needs of the needy. He often spoke against the unscrupulous deeds of the elite and wealthy. In their quest for riches, they often distorted justice, and oppressed the poor. He taught that although one did not have to get rid of private possessions, those possessions were not to define the believer. In his own practice, he did not keep what he did not need but either sold or gave away his worldly possessions to the needy. When given gifts by the rich whose methods of acquiring wealth were questionable, he returned them because he did not wish to take part in that which had brought misery to the less privileged. At one point he "caused church vessels to be melted down to redeem prisoners."<sup>43</sup>

Augustine believed in equipping others for ministry. Fellow catechists recognized him as one endowed with the ability to understand both the content and variety of the Christian faith. Deogratias and Laurentius, for example, sought specific counsel that he gladly gave, not just because of his relationship with them, but because he viewed this as a divinely mandated responsibility. To Deogratias he said:

in the exercise of these capacities which through the bounty of our Lord I am enabled to present, the same Lord requires me to offer any manner of aid to those whom He has made brethren to me, I feel constrained not only by that love and service which is due from me to you on the terms of familiar friendship, but also by that which I owe universally to my mother the Church, by no means to refuse the task, but rather to take it up with prompt and devoted willingness. For the more extensively I desire to see the treasure of the Lord distributed, the more does it become my duty, if I ascertain that the stewards, who are my fellow-servants, find any difficulty in laying it out, to do all that lies in my power to the end that they may be able to accomplish easily and expeditiously what they sedulously and earnestly aim at.<sup>44</sup>

Driven by this commitment, Augustine gave time to equip others for ministry. To this end, he wrote liberally to answer questions for his fellow instructors or any other person in his sphere of influence.

In his personal journey as a Christian, Augustine trained himself to be godly through discipline. He took time to study the Bible and pray. He fasted regularly, and abstained from pursuing worldly pleasures such as

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<sup>43</sup> Schaff, "Prolegomena: St. Augustine's Life and Work," 5.

<sup>44</sup> Augustine, *On Catechizing of the Uninstructed*, 2009b, 1.2.

fine clothes, fine food, and women. As a matter of principle, Augustine did not allow females, not even his sister, into his house and only saw them in the company of others.<sup>45</sup> Augustine ruled that the character of a person who was absent from meals must never be talked about. He was clearly a model for his students to imitate as they saw him put into practice what he had taught them.

### **Lessons from Augustine's Views and Practices**

Augustine remained a student among students. His writings show that he wrestled to comprehend the most difficult problems of life of faith and was concerned to disseminate his findings to all within his reach. Our context sometimes raises issues similar to those Augustine wrestled with as well as some unique ones. An issue such as acceptance of and/or ordination of homosexuals in church ministry, probably unheard of in Augustine's day, now threatens the sanctity of the church. The church continues to need answers about how to use God's truth to understand and respond to such realities. As Christian educators, we must get all the education we need to engage biblically and intellectually with today's issues, and to establish the church as the place where people will come for sound solutions to their dilemmas.

Prominent marks of Augustine's ministry include: his discourses were learner-centered; student needs were the priority; student differences were important. Our students are often much the same. We also experience phony inquirers who may pretend to be converted for many years, give large donations, and serve in different capacities in the church, but all for ulterior motives. Sometimes their gifts and service are celebrated at the expense of nurturing their souls. Modern educators must respect students and minister to their real needs. At the same time we need to evaluate our focus: are we inadequate, blinded by our own gifts and activities, and so we fail to guide some in the path of spiritual transformation?

Augustine sometimes felt inadequate, unable to pass on to others all that God revealed to him. He disclosed his struggle to Deogratias:

I am covetous of something better, the possession of which I frequently enjoy within me before I commence to body it forth in intelligible words: and then when my capacities of expression prove inferior to my inner apprehensions, I grieve over the inability which my tongue has betrayed in answering to my heart. For it is my wish that he who hears me should have the same completed understanding of the subject which I have myself.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Schaff, "Prolegomena: St. Augustine's Life and Work," 5.

<sup>46</sup> Augustine, *On Catechizing of the Uninstructed*, 2009b, 2.3.

Augustine ministered from the overflow of a deep, genuine, and transforming encounter with God. We see the passion of a transformed teacher desiring the very best for his students. Today, some educators do a commendable job of really seeking God's guidance on what the Bible says, and on how to present their lessons, and the results are telling. But other educators and preachers teach more from head knowledge than from any deep experiences in the presence of God because the message they present has not impacted their own lives. The immense value of the Word of God demands that we also walk with God on the path before we can effectively point out the way to others.

Ascetic living characterized Augustine's life following his conversion. In view of the eternal pleasures promised in heaven, he lived a very basic life. He urged inquirers to become sincere Christians, not motivated by the desire for temporal advantages such as worldly wealth. As educators today we must admit that the quest for material possessions has infiltrated the church and in many cases has distorted the passions and practices of both educators and students. One outcome of this is seen when preachers and teachers can no longer be trusted with church funds and scandals abound in this regard. Despicably, at times ministry is provided in return for money. Clearly, we must keep asking: in light of what God has revealed, what is really important in this life as far as worldly possessions are concerned? Then we must determine to live and teach it. In that regard, Augustine's simplicity will not look extreme.

For Augustine, the student needed to know how to love for God and his fellow man through catechism before he could be certified for baptism. Very often our church educational programs are not coordinated towards a goal. We can learn from Augustine to focus our educational efforts. Whatever we preach or teach, and whatever programs we run, we have a goal known by all stakeholders and we have ways of assessing how well we are moving toward its accomplishment. Such an approach would unify the purposes of the activities in our churches toward a specific goal. It would help us evaluate our effectiveness in detail. The church members would also invest their time knowing which of their needs will be met.

Augustine would not avoid teaching doctrine. He required the catechumens to thoroughly understand and memorize the creed and the Lord's Prayer to equip them to contest opposing views, religious or secular. When this is compared to the teaching in our churches, there is a lot of room for improvement. Systematic teaching of Christian doctrine, in many cases, seems reserved for those who go into theological training. Many churches do not have an organized way of ensuring that members are grounded in the doctrines pertinent to our faith. Even when the creed is taught, it is quickly passed over so long as there is a written document learners can refer to - something Augustine would never allow. Since our

society is also laden with heresies, and since genuine Christians continue to be ridiculed from time to time, there is an urgent need for teaching the Christian doctrines so we may prepare our members to survive in these trying times.

Augustine's students knew from the moment of conversion to break with their past sins and sinful habits and turn to God. It is unfortunate that sometimes sin is dealt with very lightly in our context. In some situations, a simple conversion prayer suffices. While we trust God for the miracle of conversion and his involvement in sanctification, we forget that some sinful habits often need a deeper engagement to root out. Sometimes we leave our members trapped in those habits without providing a way of dealing with them. The ramifications of this can be serious. New believers may fall back into sin, believing the gospel was not effective enough to rescue them from their troubles. Yet the weakness lies in the church's negligence to help free them from the shackles of sin. We may want to consider a more integrated process of presenting the message of salvation so that we not only help our members believe and receive Christ, but also invest the necessary time and training to help them break with their negative pasts.

It is clear that Augustine's practice of admitting people to church membership was very rigorous. "A radical reshaping of habits that touched the whole person: physical, psychological, intellectual, and social" took place.<sup>47</sup> This contrasts sharply with what is practiced in many of our churches today. Sometimes all that is required is for a person to hear a sermon, often unrelated to what it means to be born again, and upon a passionate, occasionally coercing appeal to give one's life to Christ, the person raises a hand and is prayed for. The person is then encouraged to keep coming to church and to pray, and the process of conversion is considered complete. With Augustine by the time a *competente* was admitted to the class of the faithful, their understanding of Bible content, of the need for Christian living and breaking with their pasts, and doctrine was of very high standard. We need to reconsider our teaching approach around the phases of evangelism, conversion, and initial follow up. Perhaps the casualties we encounter might be prevented if we clarify the content and quality of equipping in these phases, otherwise the results Augustine achieved might remain elusive.

Augustine approached the Scriptures with one goal in mind - to learn, and thereafter, to live, teach, and defend the truth. He is credited with writing some of the deepest and richest apologetic work of antiquity.<sup>48</sup> Following his example, we cannot tolerate heresy among ourselves or our

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<sup>47</sup> Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenate*, 295.

<sup>48</sup> Schaff, "Prolegomena: St. Augustine's Life and Work," 15.



students. We must learn to study the Scriptures so we correctly handle the Word of truth (2 Tim. 2:15) and refute wrong perceptions. In our African context, along with extreme heretical teachings, there occur subtle deviations from the truth that seriously impact how Christians live. For example, the average believer's view on suffering in our context probably deviates from the reverential patience in suffering that Augustine taught. Preachers and teachers today often skirt around the topic of suffering, presenting health and wealth as a mark of being blessed by God. Augustine was clear that we should trust God and unconditionally endure suffering. Time is overdue for Christian educators to take a hard look at the biblical teaching on suffering, and provide a balanced understanding on this topic. Augustine did not promise people miracles to attract them to God as often happens in our churches. Rather, he tried to attract them to God through a passionate commitment to the truth in Scriptures. We need to refute outright heretical opinions, but also constantly review what we teach lest we unwittingly propagate untruth. This latter step is what Augustine demonstrated in his *Retractions* where "he revised in chronological order the numerous works he had written before and during his episcopate, and retracted or corrected whatever in them seemed to his riper knowledge false or obscure, or not fully agreed with the orthodox catholic faith."<sup>49</sup>

Augustine viewed this life as temporary. His passion and longing for heaven flowed easily in his teaching. Worldly pleasures, wealth, and luxuries were inconsequential to him as seen from his choice to live a very simple life in the same house with his clergy.<sup>50</sup> This humility also permeated his writing, being most evident in his *Confessions*, which Schaff describes: "of all autobiographies none has so happily avoided the reef of vanity and self-praise, and none has won so much esteem and love through its honesty and humility as that of St. Augustine."<sup>51</sup> This raises a few points we need to ponder on as educators: has our view of eternity affected how we live and what we teach? When our students look at our lives, do they sense that we lay up our treasures in heaven? Are our learners living with a clear eternal perspective as a result of our teaching and example? Our answers to these questions will help us effectively respond, for example, to the teachings of the prosperity gospel that are more or less subtly eroding biblical teaching on wealth.

Augustine's commitment to equipping other catechists is worth noting. We learn from him to accept other believers and churches where the Bible is being taught. Denominations or congregations are competing with each other. We need to remember that we all belong to the one Church and that

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<sup>49</sup> Schaff, "Prolegomena: St. Augustine's Life and Work," 12.

<sup>50</sup> Schaff, "Prolegomena: St. Augustine's Life and Work," 5; Brown, 412.

<sup>51</sup> Schaff, "Prolegomena: St. Augustine's Life and Work," 3.

if other groups and denominations succeed, we too will have succeeded. Therefore, when opportunities come to help others learn how to teach more effectively or run other aspects of the ministry better, we should do whatever is in our power to help them. Augustine's teaching was not just about delivering content but also modeling Christian living. Those he recruited for priestly training he accommodated in his premises, where he ate with them, and experienced life with them. They could see him practice what he taught and then imitate him. The principle is that educators teach with their lives as well as with their words. This means that building relationships with students should become part of the teaching agenda. Downs says, "the classroom is not a very effective context for touching lives in deep ways."<sup>52</sup> Very often, our students have no other contact time with us apart from the classroom or church experience. We should find opportunities to build relationships and share life with our students outside the formal settings. Then they may have tangible examples to imitate when they see our words lived out in our lives. This is a helpful principle as Downs observes that "people will imitate most those with whom they have a relationship."<sup>53</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Although a lot more could be said about Augustine's educational views and practices, this brief analysis shows that he lived and ministered in times that are similar to our African context. Heretics outside the church enticed believers from the faith. Pagans taunted them for the clinging to such a faith in the first place. A tolerant relationship between the church and the state, with little if any persecution, brought new dynamics to church membership, and for the most part obscured the process of admitting people into the church. Many associated with the church without necessarily submitting to God's authority and rule. Within the church were both the ardent and nominal Christians. The need for sound teaching was, therefore, as vital as it is today. We see Augustine ministering in ways relevant to the needs in his circumstances.

Personally, he gave up all that was of earthly value in utter submission to the grace and love of God. He lived in simplicity and humility, modeling the message that he taught. He was a passionate student of the Scriptures, taking time to wrestle in prayer over many issues that impacted the Christian faith, and he faithfully preached, taught, and put in writing any contemplation he thought might benefit others. The church over the centuries has drawn from and benefited immensely from numerous documents he authored. His voluminous library is a source of Christian knowledge and experience. As an excellent teacher, his sound pedagogical principles, his love, respect, and esteem for his students

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<sup>52</sup> Perry G. Downs, *Teaching for Spiritual Growth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 38.

<sup>53</sup> Downs, *Teaching for Spiritual Growth*, 166.

earned him the right to become an instructor of instructors. These personal choices he made speak into the personal choices we as Christian educators could make to prepare ourselves to be a credible teacher who is first transformed in order to effectively transform others.

Few have attained a legacy like Augustine's. Out of his ministry went forth many bishops and clergy whose impact spread far and wide. His library continues to impact the growth of the church today. These achievements resonate with the longings of most educators. We can safely conclude that Augustine can offer much the twenty-first-century Christian educator in understanding and executing the responsibilities of the church's educational ministry. Augustine is indeed one of the few men in the history of the Christian faith who cannot be ignored as his positive views and practices in the educational ministry are bound to positively impact both the teacher and the student.

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