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LEGAL AFFINITIES
*Explorations in the Legal Form
of Thought*

Edited by
Patrick McKinley Brennan, H. Jefferson Powell,
and Jack L. Sammons



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Chapter 4

The Creation of Authority in a Sermon by St. Augustine

James Boyd White

My way of honoring Joe today will not be to describe or extol his achievements directly but to try to show something of what I have learned from him, particularly in the way I approach a new text and problem, in this case the creation of authority in one of Augustine's sermons.

1.

As its title reveals, Joe's early book, *The Authoritative and the Authoritarian*,¹ drew an original distinction that is important to all thought about law, and about more than law: to all thought about any form of social organization, from the family to the church—for all human organization requires authority.

As for the meaning of the word "authoritative": in this book, and in his later thinking too, Joe worked out the idea that true authority requires the presence of a person speaking authentically to another person, as

1. Joseph Vining, *The Authoritative and the Authoritarian* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

mind to mind, and establishing an essentially cooperative relationship between them. A crucial element of this relationship is openness to the new and creative, for in Joe's view the law—and this is true of every phenomenon involving true authority—is not reducible to a set of rules or commands, let alone self-evident or self-interpreting ones, but consists of a community engaged over time in the activity of shaping itself and its future through an activity of thought and imagination. When the law is properly understood, it exemplifies the practice of authority at its most self-conscious and can, for this reason, be a model of thought for the whole world.

The law, and its authority, are thus not “in” the texts that purport to declare it, but in the world and in the mind, and especially in the relation of mutual respect he calls “authoritative.”

This means that no mere system, whether social or intellectual, can have true authority, for a system, as Joe thinks of it, is not a person and can have no place for a person. The directives of a system are not explained, not interpreted, not integrated into the larger life of the relevant community—whether family, school, church, social grouping, private association, or any other—but stand apart from all those things. Unlike the law, they do not invite questions, call for a response, or constitute a form of life. They cannot have the true authority that arises only from a shared and authentic relation between persons. They are authoritarian.

All this was immensely illuminating to me when I first read Joe's book, many years ago. I think I never would have thought about authority myself without his example. In fact, his work led me to develop a related line of thought of my own, which I worked out in my book, *Acts of Hope*.²

My way of building here on what Joe had done was to focus on what might be called a literary moment, the moment when someone argues for, or assumes, the authority of something external to himself or herself—whether it is a law, a rule, a sacred text, a convention, a tradition, an idea, a history, a practice or any of the other things—let's call them institutions—for which authority can be claimed.

What particularly interested me is that such a writer or speaker not only *describes* that source of authority but *constitutes it anew* in the way he composes his own text. In its structure, in its life, in its social rela-

2. James Boyd White, *Acts of Hope: The Creation of Authority in Law, Literature, and Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

tions, the text is a kind of mirror of the institution for which it is claiming authority. This is possible because an institution is not an object or a structure (though we often talk as if it were) but a way of thinking and talking, a way of being and acting in the world.

Thus it is, to take a familiar example, that Marshall in *Marbury*,³ and every Justice after him, defines the Constitution he is invoking most completely in the way he makes his argument, and in the relations he thus creates with his readers: with other courts, with the states, and with individual citizens. In an important sense, that performance *is* the Constitution he is arguing for. Similarly, as I tried to show in *Acts of Hope*, with Richard Hooker and the English Church, with Richard II (in Shakespeare's play) and the English Crown, with Mandela and the African National Congress, with Lincoln and the American Union, with Jane Austen and the system of true manners and morals she invokes in *Mansfield Park*: each of these writers defines the source of authority they invoke in the texts they create, not just descriptively but performatively. Each offers us a world of life and action which is the embodiment of the authority for which he or she is arguing.

This of course presents the question: How do we evaluate the modes of thinking—the ways of being, the forms of thought and life—for which authority in a particular argument is claimed? This is an immensely complex question, but Joe gives us a good starting place, which is to ask whether they are, in his terms, authoritative or authoritarian.

2.

Today I want, as a kind of experiment, to bring this way of thinking about authority to theology, which Joe once called the true sister discipline to law. In particular I want to think about the form we call the sermon, using as an example one by Augustine (number nine in the canon) that I especially like.

In the sermon, as in the judicial opinion, the source of authority is thought of as external or prior to the occasion, but in neither case is it very easy to say exactly what that higher authority is. There are texts, of course, which the judge or preacher must attend to, but they mean nothing except as part of a set of other understandings and relationships and

3. *Marbury v. Madison*, 5 U.S. 137 (1803).

traditions, which cannot easily be stated. If one can refer to the judge's authority as the Law, perhaps we can refer to Augustine's authority as the Word.

Augustine certainly does not rest upon his institutional identity as priest and bishop, or upon a text that is assumed to be transparent and to speak with unquestioned authority. Rather, he creates, in the presence of his audience and in connection with them, a whole way of thinking and being, which the congregation can reject but which he hopes they will accept and in some way make their own. Thus in his writing he enacts or embodies his sense of who his audience is and who he is; of the kind of relation they have, and should have; of the kind of community Christ's church is and should be; and of the relation each should have with the external authorities Augustine invokes, especially the sacred texts.

This way of thinking and being is his embodiment of the Word: in what he does, with language and his audience, he is showing us what in his view the Word does. This may sound grandiose but I think it is not: rather, it is built into his role as preacher, just as something similar is built into the role of the judge, or law teacher, who is always saying: If you want to know what I think the Law does, and should do, look at what I do.

In the sermon we shall look at, Augustine is explicating, among other things, the ten commandments and the transformation of those commandments by Jesus, in his Sermon on the Mount. These authorities are obviously external to Augustine. He did not write the scripture; it would have existed in exactly the same form had he never lived; its claims to authority are in some sense completely independent of him. On the other hand, he does not just invoke or point to the authority of Scripture, as though it could do all the work by itself. In a real sense he creates, or better re-creates, the text that is his authority in the way he presents it. He is formally its interpreter, one who explains its meaning; but to explain meaning is to give meaning, so he in this sense at least he is embodying the authority he is explicating, upon which his own whole enterprise, indeed his right to speak this way at all, depends.

This may seem odd, but I think it is true. What is the Scripture, after all? It is not just a set of stories or commands that need to be specified or further defined; it is the voice of the Spirit working in the world. Its holiness is not only in what it says, but in how it says it: in its voice, the way it works on its language, the way it works on its audience, and perhaps above all in the activity of mind and spirit that it invites and makes possible. It is this activity that it is Augustine's task to exemplify.

It is obviously possible for one to read the Gospel as a dead text, in a dead way; Augustine's task is to read it in a way that gives it life, and the right kind of life.

3.

Augustine begins by quoting a sentence from the Psalm he and the congregation have just sung together: The Lord "*is merciful and compassionate, long-suffering, very merciful, and true.*" (Psalm 86:15).⁴

What do these words mean? Imagine yourself the preacher: what would you make of this verse? At first they may sound simply comfortable and reassuring, hardly a topic for sustained thought.

But Augustine sees them as having significance of a much more complex and difficult kind. "*All sinners,*" he says, "*are naturally very glad to hear that the Lord is 'merciful, compassionate, and longsuffering.'*" [1] But, he adds, you should also note what the Psalmist says at the end—"*and true,*"—and fear it. For the word *true* promises judgment upon us, of a kind we should all fear.

If there were only the first part, he says, you would feel safe in all your sinning. You would do whatever you wanted. If anyone objected, trying to correct you, you would stand there, amid all the scolding voices, with impudent face, and say, "Why do you frighten me with our God? He is merciful, compassionate and longsuffering." [1]

But both sides are present: let us rejoice that the Lord is merciful, but let us also fear his judgment.

This is a very brief passage, but in it we can see a lot. Augustine is presenting the Scripture here not as a single-value text, working deductively

4. In the King James version the verse reads: "But thou, O Lord, art a God full of compassion, and gracious, longsuffering, and plenteous in mercy and truth." In the Book of Common Prayer the translation is: "But you, O Lord, are gracious and full of compassion, slow to anger, and full of kindness and truth."

In presenting what Augustine says in the sermon I shall put direct translations in italics and rough summaries of what he is saying in roman type. I hope that the reader can distinguish readily enough my encapsulation of what he says from my commentary upon it. My translations are free in the sense that I do not try to mimic the structure of the Latin sentence, but I hope accurate nonetheless. In making them I have been aided by the translation by Edmund Hill in St. Augustine, *Essential Sermons*, ed. D.E. Dole (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2007).

References to quotations from Augustine's sermon are by paragraph number.

from premises to conclusions, nor as a system of commands each of which is perfectly plain in meaning, but as a text founded on the recognition of conflicting truths—a little like the “opposite or discordant qualities” which Coleridge says is the task of the poet’s imagination to reconcile.⁵ They are founded, that is, on a life-giving tension.

Here the Lord is both compassionate and committed to truth, both merciful and the ultimate source of judgment. This double fact means that we should both fear the judgments of God and rejoice in his mercy. Both are parts of the truth of God and of our own situation.

This in turn means that the Psalm, as Augustine reads it, is not simply giving orders to be obeyed, but speaking to its reader. It is creating a space between claims, between values, between truths, space in which the reader must make his or her own way. It is not an authoritarian system that is speaking to us in the Psalm, or in Augustine’s sermon, but a mind and person, speaking to a mind and person, in each of us.

Notice that Augustine achieves this in part by the creation of an imagined character, an imagined version of his audience in fact: the person who is glad that the Lord is compassionate because he sees in this quality a kind of anticipatory forgiveness of sins, which to him in turn becomes a license to commit them. This caricature represents a side of all of us, the side that in a legalistic way seeks permission to sin and in doing so simply disregards obvious elements of reality. Desire conquers the mind, and with it the capacity to make sense of what someone else is saying.

This position is obviously untenable: if you do believe in God, and his commandments as seriously meant, you cannot believe that he is going to disregard your sins. So the impulse represented in this caricature is irrational, childish, self-centered, and frankly so. But his very frankness and immaturity give the figure a certain comic appeal. He has some of the attractiveness of Pinocchio. But like Pinocchio he will have his comeuppance.

5. “This power [of the imagination of the poet] . . . reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities: of sameness, with difference; of the general with the concrete; the idea with the image; the individual and the representative; the sense of novelty and freshness with old and familiar objects; a more than usual state of emotion with more than usual order; judgment ever awake and steady self-possession with enthusiasm and feeling profound or vehement; and while it blends and harmonizes the natural and the artificial, still subordinates art to nature; the manner to the matter; and our admiration of the poet to our sympathy with the poetry.” Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “Chapter 14,” in *Biographia Literaria* (1817).

Augustine thus leads us, almost without our knowing it, into accepting the basic fact of human sinfulness (including our own) and into recognizing human resourcefulness in defending sin (including our own).

It is crucial that these things are not presented in a self-righteous or condemnatory way, but with a wit and charm that express deep acceptance of our nature. The very comical and teasing quality of the caricature works as such an acceptance. It is itself a kind of compassion and, as such, a performance of the compassion of the Word. As Augustine accepts our nature with good humor, even as he seeks to correct it, so does the Word.

4.

In what Augustine says next there is an escalation of seriousness: “*It is still possible for you to put together your defense. Do it: compose your case before your God.*”[2]

The imagined auditor is no longer a rascally and perhaps charming scamp who needs to be warned, whose impishness can be regarded with a kind of affection, but a person who actually faces the judgment that Augustine sees implied in the word “true”: the judgment of God on his life, on his soul. How is he to defend himself, how possibly?

Augustine had himself been a professional rhetorician and teacher of rhetoric—the direct equivalent of a modern law teacher—and it is from this position of expertise that he tells his auditor that professional skills and tricks will be of no value in this trial, the most important trial of all: “*There is nothing you can take for granted when he comes, nor can you bring in false witnesses by whom he will be deceived, nor can you call upon the false and evasive verbal arts of a lawyer, nor can you in any way solicit the corruption of the judge.*”

“*What then can you do before such a judge, whom you cannot corrupt or deceive?*”[2]

The auditor here is put in a position a bit like that of a modern law student who is called on in class and asked what he would say in one difficult situation or another. He finds himself stymied and tongue-tied. But now this situation is the auditor’s own, and his failure to know what he can say imperils him directly.

In focusing on what we can and cannot say in our defense, Augustine is here speaking to every Christian person, who is told not simply to “obey” but to participate in the creation of meaning. For the Christian

life, as Augustine defines it, is not the uncomprehending repetition of authoritarian commands, not brute obedience, but an authoritative engagement with the holy Word, in which we connect with it and make sense of it. That process of engagement, of mind with mind, is the foundation and fruit of our call. Without it we would not be full people.

5.

The readings to which, and out of which, Augustine is speaking include the Sermon on the Mount. Here, as you will remember, Jesus engages in an explicit transformation of the Ten Commandments. (He tells us, for example, that it is not just murder that is prohibited but anger, not just adultery but lust.⁶)

In something of an imitation of Christ, Augustine engages in his own transformation of the Ten Commandments, as he brings them to bear on the world in which he lives. In doing this he acts in light of Jesus' transformation of the commandments in Matthew. The chain is from Moses to Jesus to Augustine to us. If we take Augustine's example seriously, we see that we are to do, in the end, the same thing: to give meaning to these sacred texts in our own world, our own lives, and in so doing to transform them—not to replace them, of course, but to bring them into the world in which we live. In Joe's terms, this is the creation and transmission of the authoritative, not the authoritarian. One point of the sermon indeed, maybe of any good sermon, is to establish a place and role for the person who hears it as an active servant of God, alive to the living text, in a living church.

6.

Augustine focuses specifically on the prohibition of adultery, which is his main concern. He does not simply quote the prohibition and then reaffirm it—"You know what adultery is, and you are not to do it"—which

6. "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you, that if you are angry with a brother or sister you will be liable to judgment. . . . You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart." Matt. 5:21–22, 5:27–28 (NRSV).

would be a very short and boring sermon indeed. Rather, he engages in a complex activity of thought and imagination, in which he establishes connections both with the scriptural text and with the person he is addressing: an activity which is his version of the Christian life itself.

Here is what he does, in stages:

a.

“It is said to you, Do not engage in adultery—that is, do not go to any woman except your wife. You demand this obligation from your wife, but you do not wish to give it back to her. . . . Do you wish your house to hang its head in shame?

“For the man is the head of the woman. When the woman lives better than the man, the house does hang its head in shame. . . . Why therefore does the head want to go where it does not wish the flesh to follow? Why does the man go where he does not want the wife to follow?”[3]

The prohibition of adultery runs directly counter to a powerful strain in the culture in which the men, and the women, in Augustine’s audience have grown up, which imposes a plain sexual double standard: men, including married men, think of themselves as free to carry on whatever sexual adventures they want, while women are strictly prohibited from any such thing. Augustine is thus attacking a fundamental principle of the larger culture, not only as it exists out there in the world, but as it exists in the minds and hearts and bodies of the men before him.

His first mode of attack is to assume and, thus assert, the fundamental moral equality of women. He says, in effect, *“You demand the obligation of loyalty from your wife, but you do not give it back to her”*—a complaint that makes sense only on the assumption of equality at the core of their relation: in the mutual fidelity they owe each other, especially sexual fidelity, but not only that.

Augustine does allow the men some portion of the superiority they claim, when he speaks of the man as the head of the woman, indeed of the whole household. But he turns this grant of relative prestige or dignity against them, by showing that it is ludicrous, indeed degrading, for the head of the house to have a lower moral standard than those who should follow him. It is inconsistent with the dignity they claim as part of their identity.

Augustine thus uses this direct appeal to their sense of male superiority as a way of resisting its most important manifestation.

b.

He now focuses explicitly on the cultural context and its unequal sexual standards: “*Quarrels about adultery go on all the time, though the women do not dare to complain about their husbands. Women may even be persuaded that adultery is allowed to men, not to women.*”[4] The women are used to hearing of women taken into court, Augustine says, if they are by chance found with male servants, but they never hear of a husband taken into court when he is found with a handmaid—although the sin is equal.

Augustine is trying to get the men in his congregation to give up what the culture says they are entitled to, what everyone says they are entitled to—what their manhood requires—and to which they are erotically committed, in their bodies not just their minds and feelings.

This is a way of defining the Word not as an abstract system of thought, removed from the world, but, as Jesus himself taught us, as a way of confronting and engaging with the world, including its deepest commitments—a confrontation and engagement that is exemplified in Augustine’s own performance. He is saying, that is: just as I intrude into the world and challenge its values, the Word intrudes and challenges.

If we ask ourselves whether, *if we had been raised in such a culture*, we would have seen what Augustine sees to be wrong with it, we may be humbled. He sees the culture as deeply opposed to Christian truth. Would we have done so? Do we do so, with respect to our own culture, where we should?

To see that this is a problem for Augustine and his congregation in the early fifth century and equally so for us, both in the world of today and in our own recent past—think of the horror of racial slavery!—is to see the task of reading the sacred texts as crucial, complex, and difficult. It cannot consist merely of the replication of rules and commands, as though their meaning and application were self-evident, for, just like Augustine himself and his congregation, we are all constructed in such a way as to make us very skillful in denying the meaning of what we read and avoiding its bite.

The preacher’s task is to help us break down our own defenses against the force and demand of Christian truth. Our task as readers of the scripture is to do the same thing on our own behalf. What the sacred text calls for in us, as Augustine shows us, is not mindless obedience, but strenuous and mindful engagement in an activity the point of which

is to transform us ourselves—not just our ideas but our feelings, our desires, our ways of imagining ourselves and other people. This call to engagement is in an important sense its meaning, what it exists to do; and, as Augustine presents it, it is inherently authoritative, not authoritarian, in nature.

c.

“Suppose a man’s wife thought that adultery was allowable to the man, until she heard in church that it was not. So now he has to put up with her sharp tongue:

“What you are doing is not lawful. We heard that together in church. We are Christians. What you demand from me, you should give me in return. I owe you fidelity, you owe me fidelity, we both owe Christ fidelity. Even if you deceive me, you do not deceive him to whom we belong, you do not deceive him who bought us.”[4]

This seems to me a truly extraordinary passage, full of interest and courage. Augustine speaks to the men, and at the same time to their wives, by imagining what all this looks and feels like to the women, who are afraid to speak openly to their husbands. He speaks for the wives, through their imagined mouths. He says what they would say if they dared.

He gives a voice to the voiceless, and in doing this he is realizing the character of the Word that is his authority. He imagines it into action.

The force of what he does is intensified by the fact that women are present in the congregation, for the words that he gives the woman will change her relation with her husband from this moment on. What was not to be said has been said. The man has been shamed publicly, and more than that, shamed in front of his wife. As Augustine is shaming them so the Word shames them.

For him the church is the place where what is unsayable in the world is sayable. The sermon is the mode of saying it. The aim is the recognition of the full humanity of all people. Such a sermon is an embodiment of the Word.

d.

Augustine now turns briefly to the ten commandments as a whole. Using the language of another Psalm that they have sung (Psalm 144:9),

he imagines himself as a singer, he says, as someone who will sing songs that “sound sour to you now, but will later grow sweet”—in this way imitating the life-giving tension that he saw in the God who is both compassionate and just.

“*What kind of song do I sing?*” he asks. “*I carry a harp of ten strings, as we just sang in the Psalm: ‘God, I will sing a new song to you, I shall sing on a harp of ten strings.’*”[6] By the harp of ten strings, Augustine says, is meant the ten commandments the Lord has given us: three relating to our duties to him, seven to our duties to our neighbor. That is why there were two tablets at Sinai: one for the three, one for the seven.

The structure of the ten commandments as a whole thus mirrors Jesus’ statement about the law, that at heart it consists of two commandments, love of God and love of neighbor.

Augustine says that those who had only the Decalogue complied with it out of fear of punishment, not out of love of justice.⁷ [8] The old law was enforced by fear, and a person motivated by fear is only carrying the harp, not singing with it. To sing a new song, you need to become a new man. If you sing it out of love, you sing a new song, as the Psalm called upon us to do. “*If you do it out of fear you carry the harp but do not sing. If you do not obey at all, you throw away the harp.*”[8]

Here Augustine is transforming our sense both of what the commandments are and what our relation with them should be. First, we need to understand that the ten are really the same as the two; then, that the two are both based on love, not fear—which means that the ten are likewise based on love not fear. Then we ourselves must learn to have the desire, expressed in the Psalm, to become new people, from the inside out.

Only then we can see the last thing, his main point, that the life that the commandments promise and seek to invoke is not grim obedience to a set of severe commands, but is instead like singing a beautiful song, out of love, with an amazing harp of ten strings. “*Who carries the harp out of fear is still in the old song.*”[8] What is promised is a life of song and joy, which Augustine enacts and makes real for us in own song, his own joy.

This is a new vision of what at the outset of the sermon Augustine called the truth of God, which he said we were to fear. In one sense it is still true that we should fear his judgments. But we should also see that

7. I have to say that this is in my view a profound misunderstanding of the love of the law at the heart of much of Judaism. Think, for example, of Psalm 1, instinct with love of the Torah.

the life that God is offering those who do what he commands, namely to love him and their neighbor, is not one of fear at all, but of pleasure and joy, a life of beautiful song.

The idea of mere obedience to an authoritarian decree has thus been transformed into something very different: the joyful and voluntary yielding of the will to an authority, to a loving person, by a person whose actions are grounded not in anxiety or jealousy, but love.

The sense of love Augustine invokes is evident in his own relation to his audience: this is how a Christian loves.

e.

Augustine returns to the explicit theme of adultery, addressing the arguments he imagines the males in his audience will use to defend themselves and what they do:

You try to excuse yourselves by saying, "I don't go to another's wife, do I? I go to my own slave." But do you want your wife to say to you: "I don't go to another's husband, do I? I go to my own slave." [11]

This is argument in the form of a *reductio ad absurdum*: the idea that the husband should be as easy about his wife having sex with a slave-boy as he wants her to be about him having sex with a slave-girl is just impossible. But the way Augustine presents the argument makes it very difficult to resort to the established view that the woman is merely a possession. Even to suggest that she might do what the man does is to recognize that she is a person with a will, with desires, with a moral life as complete as the man's. This is not a truth of the culture in which the men live. But can they say the opposite, even in their imagination, in the face of the case Augustine is creating? That is the problem Augustine is creating for them.

f.

He goes on, in his chastising vein:

It is better that she should weep for you than to imitate you. For she is a chaste and holy woman, and a true Christian, who grieves for her fornicating husband, not out of the flesh but out of love.

She owes to God, to Christ, the fidelity you demand of her, and gives it to you because God orders it, even if you are committing adultery. She is showing her chastity to God.

For Christ speaks inside the hearts of good women, he speaks inside where the husband cannot hear, for they are not worthy to do so.[11]

And what Christ says in essence is: If you are grieved by what your husband has done, don't imitate him and do wrong; let him imitate you and do right. "*Insofar as he behaves badly, do not consider him your head, but me.*"[11]

This is extraordinary: the wife—the woman, the socially oppressed and marginalized—is seen as a moral actor just as the man is; indeed, she is seen as his moral superior, enduring his injury without inflicting one of her own.

In this way of imagining her Augustine is defining, in his own performance, the meaning of the central command, to love our neighbor—the command that lies behind the prohibition of adultery. As Augustine loves her, so the Word loves her. And this love is truly Christian: respectful, admiring, corrective, and affectionate.

What is even more astonishing, Christ himself is now present within her. When the husband is disloyal, Augustine tells us, Christ intervenes in the marriage itself, as a voice within the woman. In fact, he takes the husband's place—the place upon which all his self-esteem rests—as the head of his wife.

By stages Augustine has thus brought us into the Christian revolution. The woman has evolved from the silent object of male possession to a full moral actor, capable of judgment and expression, and having within her the spirit of Christ. In thinking of her, speaking to her, in this way, Augustine is saying: This is how the Word thinks of her, speaks to her.

g.

Augustine confronts two additional arguments, in ascending order of difficulty.

First:

Do not say to yourself, when you want to do something sexual that you should not do, "I do not have a wife, I do what I want; I am

not sinning behind the back of my wife.” . . . You know the price paid for you, you know what you are approaching, [namely, the Eucharist] what you will eat and drink, or rather whom you will eat and drink. Abstain from fornication.[14]

Second:

Nor should you say to me: “I go to a brothel, to a whore, to a prostitute. I do not violate the precept that prohibits adultery because I do not yet have a wife, nor do I do anything behind her back; nor do I violate the prohibition against coveting the wife of my neighbor. Since I go to the public place of sexual resort, what commandment do I violate?”[14]

Augustine turns to the rest of the congregation, as if he has really been speaking with one of them, and asks: Is it true that we have no string to play here, nothing with which to tie him up? He will not escape, Augustine goes on, since there is something to tie him with.

We find it in the ten strings of our lyre. The ten precepts reduce to two, as we have heard, love of God and neighbor, and these two to one: What you do not wish done to you, do not do to your neighbor.[14]

Here Augustine has added another stage to his reading of the ten commandments: as before they became two—love God and your neighbor—now they become one: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.⁸

Trained perhaps like Augustine himself as a rhetorician or lawyer, the imagined interlocutor shows that he knows what to say in response: If I steal or murder or disrespect my parents, I am doing what I would not want done to me, he says. Likewise if I covet my neighbor’s wife, or if I am unfaithful to my own. *“But when I go to a prostitute, to whom am I doing what I would not want to have happen to me?”[15]*

8. Not that Augustine believes that the ten commandments disappear as they are reduced first to two, then to one. Rather, he is identifying the fundamental principles upon which those commandments rest, which are to be used in determining their meaning as they are brought into the world in which he and his audience live. He is thus creating a multilayered text and a conversation between the parts, a lovely example of his anti-authoritarian character and commitments.

This is a serious question, to which Augustine's answer is this: "To God himself—which is a more serious offense than any other."¹⁵ The principle of doing to others as you would have them do to you thus applies to *both* of the two Christian commandments: to love God and to love your neighbor. You should not do to your human neighbor what you would not have done to you; likewise you should not do God what you would not want done to you.

"But how am I doing anything bad to God?" is the reply.

"You are corrupting yourself."

"But how do I do an injury to God when I corrupt myself?"

In response to this legalistic but difficult question, Augustine uses an image: suppose that you had a portrait of yourself painted on the wall of your house. Would you not feel insulted if someone threw stones at it, even though it is only an image—certainly not alive, not capable of thought or feeling?

So when you corrupt the image of God, which is what you are, through your fornications and overflowings of lust, you observe that you have not approached the wife of another, you observe that you have done nothing behind the back of your wife. But do you not also observe whose image you have violated through these unlawful lusts of fornication? . . . Hear the Apostle: "Do you not know that you are the temple of God and the spirit of God dwells in you? If someone ruins the Temple of God, God will ruin him."¹⁵

In this way Augustine is affirming the full humanity not only of the woman but of the man.⁹ At the same time the sin of adultery, which is a special form of disloyalty, comes to represent all sins, since all sins are a form of disloyalty to God. All sins deface the image of God. This is

9. And soon the humanity even of the slave. Still speaking to the man and master Augustine says, Fidelity is a beautiful thing when you demand it of your slave, but not when it is demanded of you—then you do not see it at all. If your servant is faithful, you praise him, saying "I have a wonderful slave, a great slave, a faithful slave."

But what you praise in your slave, you do not exhibit to your God. Yet it is God who commands your servant to be faithful, "Just as he orders your wife not to commit adultery even if you do, so he commands your slave to serve you even if you do not serve God." The slave, like the wife, owes the duty of fidelity from which you benefit not to you but to God. *It is just [and right] that you should notice that you are under a Lord to whom your slave attends so that he may serve you.*¹⁶

why the prohibition on adultery reaches the unmarried man who uses a prostitute: this is not “adultery” in the usual definition, but it is disloyal and it is sexual and is an offense to God.

* * *

Augustine’s sermon is much more complex and interesting than I have been able to show. But I hope the main point I have tried to make is clear enough, namely that he is offering his auditors, and us, a world, created in his sermon, which is his embodiment of God’s world.

He does nothing after all on his own authority, resting on his own values, his own perceptions. Everything is an expression of the authority under which he works, what I have called the Word. The Word, the life it stimulates in us, are embodied in the way he defines himself as the speaker, and the congregants as the audience, as reasoning and good-hearted people capable of responding to this elaborate and sophisticated argument; in the way he defines the wife or woman, emerging into full personhood; in the way he defines the sacred text, with increasing complexity, increasing depth, and increasing clarity—as the ten commandments become two, then one, while still retaining their original form; in the way he expresses respect for his congregants as the people they are, yet moves them beyond themselves; and in the way he gives a voice to the voiceless and oppressed, recognizing the full humanity of every person—directly in the case of the woman, indirectly in the case of the slave.

In all of this he transforms our image of the sacred text, as he replicates it in his own action: it is a Word driven by love and it promises us freedom and joy; it is a Word that intrudes into the values of the culture, to transform them; it is a Word that gives a voice to the voiceless woman—and not only a voice, a new husband who can serve as her lord, in Christ himself.

To return to the key terms I have borrowed from Joe, Augustine’s achievement is to imagine and make real in his sermon the Word as a presence and force that is deeply authoritative, not authoritarian.