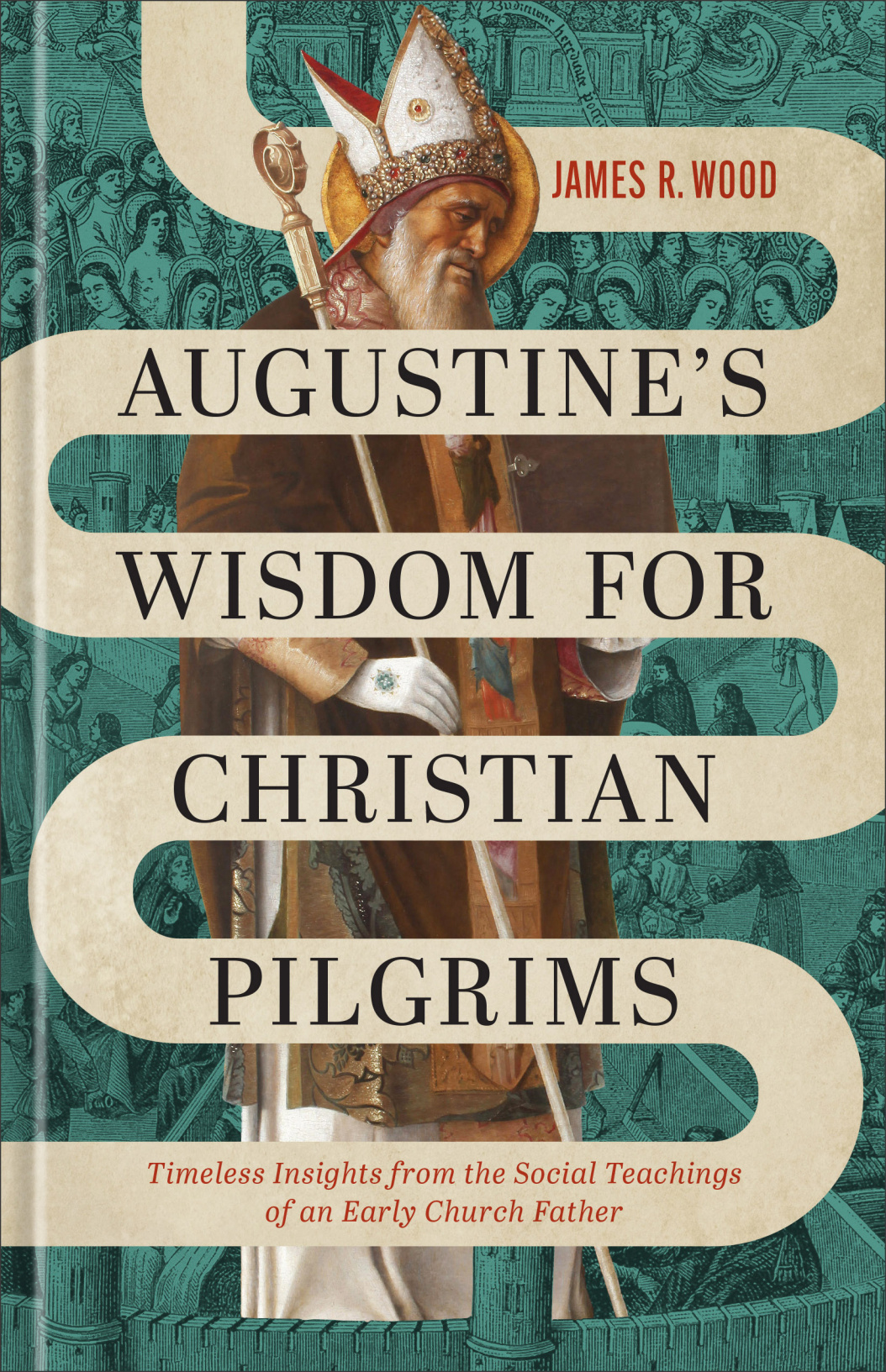
JAMES R. WOOD
AUGUSTINE'S
WISDOM FOR
CHRISTIAN
PILGRIMS
Timeless Insights from the Social Teachings
of an Early Church Father

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Timeless Insights from the Social Teachings of an Early Church Father

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FOREWORD

I can't remember the setting, but I clearly remember the experience: Sometime during my doctoral studies in Cambridge, I woke up startled to find I was more Team Augustine than Team Calvin. It wasn't a conscious decision, nor a renunciation of Calvin. As the subject of my master's thesis, Calvin was the first great theologian I studied closely; he was the theologian who taught me that close study only serves to greaten a theologian's greatness. Before I had read much Augustine, I cherished Calvin for Augustinian reasons—not only for his doctrines of grace but for his rich and underappreciated teachings on the church and sacraments.

Calvin was my first love, but I came home from England in an Augustine hoodie and tinkling with Augustine bling. Augustine ignited my theological imagination for many reasons: his insatiable curiosity, which translates everything from a spider catching a bug to the powers of the human soul into meditation and prayer; his infectious obsession with language, signs, time, sacrifice, and sacraments; for his grasping the dynamic of things concealed and things revealed, elaborated in unmatched detail in his treatise against Faustus the Manichean; for his sermons and biblical explorations, which, wherever they begin, scurry from one end of

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the canon to the other; for his innocence of the rigid disciplinary limits theologians now place on theology; for his inscribing the history of the city of man into the history of the city of God; for his labyrinthine way with words; and for the way the labyrinth resolves into an aphorism.

Many Protestants know the anti-Pelagian Augustine, but James Wood is right to start with the anti-Donatist Augustine. In his slim *Saint Augustine: The Odyssey of His Soul*, published a century ago, Karl Adam claimed that the notion of the *totus Christus* occupies the center of Augustine's theology. Augustine follows Pauline hints. "Just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ" (1 Cor. 12:12). "Christ" is Paul's—and Augustine's—title not only for the anointed head, Jesus, but for the head-and-body union, both drenched with heavenly dew.

You can hear the *totus Christus* in Augustine's *Enarrationes* on the Psalms, where the voice of the psalmist is now the voice of Christ, now the voice of the church, now the harmony of both together. You see it in his eucharistic theology, centered, so I think, on the exquisite sentence "You are what you receive." Augustine's city of God is no mere human community, nor even a communion of men with angels, but the civic community joined as members to the Lord Jesus. It may seem strange for a Protestant like James Wood to highlight the churchy Augustine, but only because Protestants have wandered so prodigally from the Reformers' Augustine.

Because of the *totus Christus*, Augustine's is a theology equally Christocentric and ecclesiocentric and, for that reason, a theology that occupies its own space and time in this world and clashes with the dreams and feats of man. The *City of God* is the greatest work of cultural analysis and critique ever written. Augustine knows Rome's myths and histories, its absurdities and internal contradictions. He admires the Greek philosophical tradition but knows why it runs aground, ignorant as it is of the eternal wisdom of the Father. He's at his best when he strips the self-justifying

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finery to penetrate the loves and terrors that dominate the Roman soul. Only the boldest and keenest observer would accuse Lucretia, a famous suicide, of pride; or attribute the brutal glories of the Roman *imperium* to fear of death; or discern how love of praise twisted Roman virtues into glittering vices. James amply demonstrates that Augustine speaks with the same penetration to our cultural pathologies. Augustine is a theologian for all seasons.

Augustine's Wisdom for Christian Pilgrims is a splendid introduction to Augustine, with a judicious diagnosis of contemporary culture thrown in for good measure. It lives up to its promise; it does indeed give wisdom. But I'm sure James will agree that the book will best succeed if it inspires readers to open the pages of the incomparable original.

Peter J. Leithart

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INTRODUCTION

My Augustinian Self

I have been reading Augustine (AD 354–430) since the earliest days of my Christian faith. After placing my faith in Christ at the end of my freshman year of college and committing myself to following him with my whole life, I quickly sought guidance not only from Scripture but also from wise teachers who had stood the test of time and nourished the faith of Christians across denominational lines. Once one begins down that path, it is not long before one arrives at Augustine.

Like many, I began with *The Confessions*. What I encountered there was a man after God's own heart: unflinching in his honesty about sin, restless in his pursuit of truth, continually growing in wisdom and holiness, and deeply devoted to the people of God. Augustine was also unmistakably brilliant. At that stage of my life, that mattered greatly. I needed to know that the Christian faith did not require me to leave my intellect at the door. But I also learned from Augustine that the Christian life cannot be reduced to correct ideas about God. True faith must transform the whole person—mind, will, and desire—and must order our life together

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in the world, including our social and political life. Augustine has been a guide for me ever since.

When I later discerned a call to academic work, I found myself drawn—almost instinctively—to questions that are unmistakably Augustinian. My research and writing have focused on the intersection of church, culture, and politics. By training, I am a political theologian and ecclesiologist. Much of my scholarly work has engaged modern figures who share many of Augustine's commitments: thinkers marked by a high doctrine of the church, a deep concern for Christian unity, and a refusal to treat public life as religiously neutral. This has shaped my academic publications on figures such as John Calvin, John Nevin, Sergei Bulgakov, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and Henri de Lubac—who was the subject of my doctoral dissertation. These commitments also shaped my first book, on T. F. Torrance.

My formal engagement with Augustine intensified during my theological studies at Princeton Theological Seminary, where I first studied him closely in a seminar led by John Bowlin on Augustine's social ethics. That course drew me deeply into Augustine's writings and confirmed my sense that his thought remains indispensable for navigating the pressures of modern life. Since then, I have published a range of academic and popular essays engaging Augustine on questions of church, culture, and politics.

After completing my doctoral studies and beginning my teaching career, I longed to return to sustained, primary engagement with Augustine himself. I have been fortunate to do so at Redeemer University, where I regularly teach an upper-level honors seminar devoted entirely to Augustine's life and thought. Preparing for that course—and reading Augustine alongside students year after year—has refined my thinking, renewed my affection for him, and confirmed my conviction that his wisdom speaks powerfully to our moment. In the course of this work, I acquired the complete New City Press edition of Augustine's writings, most of which I have now read, much of it closely. His *Sermons*

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in particular have become a regular part of my devotional life after Scripture itself.

Augustine has shaped not only my scholarship but my imagination and habits of thought. I find it difficult now to think about God, the church, or the world apart from him. He has been my primary guide. My hope in this book is that, through these pages, he might become one of yours as well. He is relevant not only for academics and students but for all Christians, especially those in the West.

The Ever-Present Father of the West

Augustine of Hippo is considered by most Christians in the West as a father of the church. He is honored by Roman Catholics and Protestants as a foundational figure in the early postapostolic centuries who helped preserve, clarify, and transmit the apostolic faith. Within the Western theological tradition, no early Christian thinker has exercised an authority comparable to Augustine's. Thus, as someone once famously said that "all of Western philosophy is but a footnote to Plato,"[1] we could say that "all of Western theology is but a footnote to Augustine."

In Augustine's autobiography, *The Confessions*, he presents himself as uniquely introspective and vulnerable for the classical world. We get to know him in an intimate way through the text, in a manner that is not that strange in our literary context but was certainly abnormal in his.[2]

1. This was famously uttered by Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947).

2. "In so many ancient and medieval biographies . . . we meet heroes described in terms of their essential, ideal qualities. It is almost as if they had no past: even their childhood is described only in terms of omens of the future 'peak' of their life. . . . We meet them full face: it is as if they had sloughed off, in their past, all that did not point directly to the image of perfection to which they conformed." Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (University of California Press, 2000), 167.

See also the discussion of the uniqueness of *The Confessions* in the ancient world in Joshua D. Chatraw and Mark D. Allen, *The Augustine Way: Retrieving a Vision for the Church's Apologetic Witness* (Baker Academic, 2023), 120.

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Augustine's story resonates with us moderns. A young man in a flyover country with talent[3] and ambition[4] flees to the big city, hoping to make a name for himself in the world.[5] Along the way, he struggles with lust[6] and pride[7] but also with a yearning desire to know and be known by others.[8] He undergoes a somewhat dramatic conversion, and overnight his life is drastically altered, though he does not cease to struggle with sin.[9] He shares his raw, honest attempts to process the emotional suffering he endured by the loss of his lover (whose name we never learn), the death of a friend, and the death of his mother.[10] Presumably because it was simply too painful, he only briefly mentions the death of his son, Adeodatus, who was baptized at the same time as Augustine and who died soon after.[11]

Augustine then spends the rest of his career shepherding the Lord's flock under his care and fighting against the enemies of the faith—whether heretics and schismatics or the church's cultured despisers. Many of the battles we continue to face today echo those he waged against his primary opponents.

Recovering Augustine's Wisdom for Today

The well-read Christian today is likely familiar with *The Confessions*, and that is a great introduction to Augustine and truly a masterpiece. However, there are many lessons in his other writings

3. See Augustine, *Confessions* I.17.27; IV.16.30. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations and references to works by Augustine are from *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* published by New City Press.

4. See Augustine, *Confessions* I.19.30; II.3.5; III.4.7; IV.1.1.

5. See Augustine, *Confessions* II.3.8; VI.6.9.

6. See Augustine, *Confessions* I.18.28; II.3.6–7.

7. See Augustine, *Confessions* II.2.2; III.1.1, 5.9; IV.15.27; V.10.18.

8. See Augustine, *Confessions* II.2.2, 8.16–9.17; III.1.1; cf. his discussion of social "miseries" related to the obstacles to full, reliable knowledge of others in *City of God* XIX.5–8.

9. See Augustine, *Confessions* VIII.5.10–12, 9.21–10.22.

10. See Augustine, *Confessions* IV.2.2, 4.7–9.14; VI.15.35; IX.11–13.

11. See Augustine, *Confessions* IX.6.

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that also merit attention. They offer us wisdom for today and principles relevant to the issues we face. Unfortunately, not enough work has been done to tease these out in an accessible way in a single volume. That is the purpose of this book: It aims to distill the central threads of Augustine's thought and draw out their contemporary relevance—serving as a midwife for his enduring wisdom in the modern world.

The theme of the book is "wisdom for pilgrims." Pilgrims journey *away* from home on their way *to* home. Their temporary rootlessness is *intentional*; they are purposefully heading somewhere, heading toward a new home. We need wisdom during this time—during our existence on this earth as we journey toward our final destination: at rest with God in his kingdom. That is our home, and we are not yet there. And this time is somewhat precarious (at least from our perspective—for in reality, it is all in God's hands). Augustine captures this dynamic with the motif of *pilgrimage*.[12]

To appreciate the image of pilgrimage in Augustine's writings, you have to know that he was not fond of travel.[13] According to his preeminent biographer, Augustine "always associated [travel] with a sense of protracted labour and of the infinite postponement

12. See Gregory W. Lee, *The Essential* City of God: *A Reader and Commentary* (Baker Academic, 2025), 3. Lee explains that "Augustine's defining image" for understanding "the Christians' posture toward the world" is "pilgrimage"—"a multivalent term that encompasses the ideas of exile, sojourning, journeying, and noncitizenship." See also Sarah Stewart-Kroeker, *Pilgrimage as Moral and Aesthetic Formation in Augustine's Thought* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 10–17.

13. See Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 145, 196–97, 206, 323. See Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms* 137.12, where Augustine associates pilgrimage inherently with anguish: "Isn't this present life a considerable anguish in itself? If it is not an anguish, it is no pilgrimage." This "anguish" is driven by love—to be in the permanent and undisturbed presence of our beloved.

See also Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms* 85.11. Augustine argues that our love for home produces misery during our pilgrimage. If one enjoys the pilgrimage, one is "no lover of home," for "if our homeland is sweet to us, pilgrimage is bitter; and if pilgrimage is bitter, we are in trouble all day and every day." We will only be freed from these miseries when we are home with the Lord: "There labor and groaning will pass away. . . . There will be vision unclouded, love without satiety. As long as you are not there, you see that you are not in a good state."

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of his dearest wishes; and these associations will colour the most characteristic image of the spiritual life in his middle age."[14] Augustine's conception of "pilgrimage" does not overlap with our understanding of travel and tourism; rather, it is more akin to captivity, or to a temporary resident who is a stranger in a strange land, feeling out of place, homesick, and longing to be released so that they can return to their true homeland.[15]

This theme is especially relevant to Christians in Western nations today. In fact, there are many similarities between our post-Christian societies and the Roman Empire of Augustine's day.[16] Augustine lived in a society that had been previously Christianized but increasingly had come to turn against those Christian sources in a period of social disruption and political decline.[17] Just decades before Augustine's birth in AD 354, Constantine, the emperor of Rome, converted to Christianity. With the Edict of Milan in the year 313, he granted Christianity the status of a tolerated religion, freeing it from the previous threat of persecution. Not only was Christianity tolerated in the Roman Empire, but it became the religion of emperors.

In the following decades, Christianity would become even more "official" as the established religion of the empire. However, after

14. Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 145.

15. One could even characterize Augustine's fundamental insights about religion and the restlessness of the human creature in this life as about "the unsatisfied longing of the homesick heart." John Burnaby, *Amor Dei: A Study of Religion in St. Augustine* (Wipf & Stock, 2007), 96. See Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms* 119.6. There Augustine associates our earthly pilgrimage with the theme of "exile," far from their true homeland they love. "What kind of homeland is it? A very great country," explains Augustine. And the pilgrim-exiles who are far from this home are "wretched." See also *Expositions of the Psalms* 148.4. There Augustine associates our earthly pilgrimage with the theme of "captivity." We "sigh for" the renewed earth, the new Jerusalem, and "anyone who does not sigh as a pilgrim will never rejoice as a citizen, for there cannot be any desire in him." This life is described as a form of imprisonment, and we must fight to fan into flame love for our future home so as to not place our hearts ultimately on our life here and now.

16. These similarities are discussed in Chatraw and Allen, *Augustine Way*, 23–33.

17. See Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, ix. Brown explains that Augustine lived "in an age of rapid and dramatic change."

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Constantine there was backlash with the imperial reign of Julian—known as the Apostate—from AD 361 to 363. Julian tapped into traditionalist resentment about the turn away from the old gods and pagan practices and the roots of the Roman Empire. This resentment lingered and festered, only to erupt when Rome was sacked in the year 410. This was a major step in the long decline of the Roman Empire, and many pagans—especially the elites—blamed Christianity for making the people weak by turning against the great classical virtues and offending the old gods by refusing to offer sacrifices to them.

There are evident echoes in Western societies today. Most Western nations have deep Christian roots, and there remains memory of a once-dominant Christian public religion. However, elites and culture-shaping institutions have largely turned against those Christian roots. Christianity is once again seen as antisocial and a danger to a society already in disarray and decline.

Augustine, through his writings, was speaking into a world that had familiarity with Christianity yet was seeking to move on. He wanted to provide guidance to Christians who felt beleaguered and disoriented as well as to defend Christian truth against its enemies.

Learning to Live as Pilgrims

That's why Augustine's wisdom is so relevant today. Many Christians feel out of place in a secular age. They feel like strangers in an increasingly strange land—like pilgrims.

However, Augustine would challenge us to embrace this pilgrim identity.[18] In this life, we are always on our journey to God and the city of God; this means that we will not feel at home in any culture until Christ returns. Augustine, in a certain sense, wants

18. This is a consistent theme in *The City of God*. See I.preface; XIV.9; XV.1, 20; XVI.41. According to Augustine, Christians are those citizens of the city of God who live as pilgrims during this life. Until the kingdom comes, they remain pilgrims in this world.

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to unhook us from excessive attachment to things in this world,[19] including our political societies.[20]

To some, this might sound cold and ethereal, perhaps even inhuman. However, Augustine himself had intimate experience with the inability of created things to satisfy his deepest longings. He came to understand that excessive attachment to such things was a form of improper self-love—a worship of self and relating to created goods without referring them to their Creator.[21] He knew that this was often attended by pride—being pleased with ourselves and thinking that we are the light while turning away from the Light that is our true life.[22] In contrast to such excessive attachment to this world and prideful self-exaltation, Augustine eventually learned that we need to live as humble pilgrims to understand that our true home is beyond, in God and his renewed creation with the redeemed saints and angels.

From Wandering to Rest

Prior to his conversion to Christianity, Augustine was a restless wanderer. This motif frames much of the autobiographical narration in *The Confessions*. Perhaps Augustine's most famous quote comes in the opening lines about finding rest in God: "You have made us

19. See Augustine, *Confessions* II.5.10; IV.10.15; XIII.21.29–22.32. See also Stewart-Kroeker, *Moral and Aesthetic Formation*, 242: "Delighting in transient things in praise of God is good and right, but becoming stuck to them is to seek permanent rest in the wrong place, for it cannot be found in things of this world. . . . Loving something rightly according to its ontological status as a good and beautiful created thing means loving it not as a thing to rest in, but loving it along the way to the Creator and eternal rest in inexhaustible beauty."

20. See Veronica Roberts Ogle, *Politics and the Earthly City in Augustine's* City of God (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 183.

21. See Augustine, *Confessions* II.6.12; *City of God* XIV.3–4, 28. This is also a way that sinful man follows in the footsteps of the devil, and this perverted self-love is what defines the city of man.

22. "The first evil . . . is this: when man is pleased with himself, as if he were himself light, he turns away from the light which, if it pleased him, would have made him light itself." Augustine, *City of God* XIV.13.

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for yourself, and our heart is restless until it finds rest in you."[23] Augustine ends that great work looking forward to the eternal sabbath where God will rest in us and will be our true rest forever.[24]

Between those two bookends, Augustine describes his restless wandering, his false pilgrimage of sorts—his journey to make a home apart from God. This is the pilgrimage of a prodigal—an abandonment and rebellion that leads to existential exile, in which one is truly not at home anywhere, not even with oneself.[25] At points throughout the work, Augustine subtly compares his journeying to the tales of wandering in Virgil's (70–19 BC) *Aeneid*.[26] Augustine's wandering was waywardness—rebellion against the God who is his life.[27] He describes his wandering not only as rebellious but as a form of rivalrous mimicry of God's omnipotence—imitating the Creator God in a perverse way by attempting to

23. Augustine, *Confessions* trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford University Press, 1992), I.1.1.

24. See Augustine, *Confessions* XIII.35.50–38.53. This is also how Augustine ends *The City of God*. See *City of God* XXII.30; cf. XX.17.

25. See Augustine, *Confessions* II.10.18; III.2.4; V.12.22.

26. For Augustine's familiarity with the *Aeneid* and how it functions in *Confessions* see John O'Meara, "Virgil and Augustine: The *Aeneid* in the *Confessions*," *The Maynooth Review* 13 (1988): 30–43. For how the *Aeneid* functions in both *The Confessions* and *City of God* see Sabine MacCormack, *The Shadows of Poetry: Vergil in the Mind of Augustine* (University of California Press, 1998), 226–27:

> For Augustine, Vergil spoke of values and ideas that were alive and powerful, however much he disagreed with them. . . . In the *Confessions*, Augustine gave shape to his life as he remembered it . . . ; here the long journey of Vergil's Aeneas and incidents on that journey provided both a model and precedents to be rejected. In the *City of God*, Vergil was the spokesman of Rome, of Roman virtue and glory, and of Roman expectations, as Augustine construed them, of life after death. . . . Throughout, Augustine's engagement with Vergil was propelled by the endeavor to see *beyond* what the great poet had said.

See also Chatraw and Allen, *Augustine Way*, 38–39. In footnote 11, they mention that Augustine cites Virgil over seventy times in the first five books of *The City of God*. And they explain that the *Aeneid* functioned as "society-defining myth" of the Roman social imagination, "captur[ing] the collective imagination of generations, providing shared symbols and language for Rome's citizens as well as a normative framework for navigating their life."

27. See Augustine, *Confessions* I.13.20.

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define reality on his own terms.[28] This wandering, he would later understand, is lostness; the freedom it secures is that of a runaway slave, and as such this freedom is false.[29] Augustine came to realize that we cannot run away from God; though he might be lost from our sight as we journey away from him, we are never lost to him.[30]

Runaways and wanderers need to come home. Augustine once again alludes to Virgil to argue that the soul needs to return to God, who is our eternal joy.[31] God is ever present, yet we delay in turning to him. Thankfully, God takes the initiative to call us back to himself—who is the only safe haven for the soul, and whom we forfeited in our wandering.[32] Augustine explains that spiritual creatures, by virtue of their created nature, find their home only in God; only there will the soul find real rest.[33]

God is our true home, the rest we desperately seek. When we finally come to him, we cease our restless wandering. Thankfully, we are not left on our own to make this turn. Rather, God converts us to himself, and the Spirit implants love for God and his kingdom.[34] He turns us around and puts us back on the path of our proper pilgrimage.[35]

The Way Home: Christ and His Church

The way to our beatific homeland, explains Augustine, is Christ himself and his humility.[36] By virtue of his humble condescension

28. See Augustine, *Confessions* II.14.

29. See Augustine, *Confessions* III.3.5.

30. See Augustine, *Confessions* II.3.4; V.2.2; X.27.28. See also the famous quote in III.6.11: "You were more intimately present to me than my innermost being, and higher than the highest peak of my spirit."

31. See Augustine, *Confessions* VIII.3.7–4.9.

32. See Augustine, *Confessions* X.40.65–66.

33. See Augustine, *Confessions* XIII.2.3.

34. See Augustine, *Confessions* VIII.12.30.

35. See Augustine, *Confessions* XIII.9.10.

36. See Augustine, *Confessions* III.8.16; V.3.5; VII.9;13; VII.18.24; VII.20.26; X.42.67–43.69; *City of God* IX.20–21; XIV.13. See also Stewart-Kroeker, *Moral and Aesthetic Formation*, 236: "The traveler's relationship to Christ is all-encompassing.

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in taking up flesh and of his loving substitution on the cross—in other words, by his incarnation and mediation—we become sons and daughters, able to be at home in the light. Our Life came down, summons us to return to him, and lifts us up.[37] While we persist in our pilgrimage, the Spirit of Christ confirms our status as sons and daughters of the king of creation, heirs to all things in Christ, our elder brother.[38]

God sought us when we were not seeking him, and he continues to draw near through Scripture, where Christ illumines our pilgrimage with his wisdom and teaches us to receive his Word with humble hearts.[39] We also must learn this way through the Scriptures both with and in the church throughout our journey as pilgrims on the way to the heavenly Jerusalem, our true homeland.[40] The church, particularly through its tradition and authoritative teachers, guides us in the proper interpretation of Scripture, and it is this community in which the "saving humility"[41] is promoted and the love of God is nurtured.[42]

God provides to the church wise teachers as guides, of whom Augustine is one.[43] Augustine perceives his task as serving the church on its pilgrimage—offering wisdom to fellow citizens of the future kingdom, fellow travelers on the way.[44]

Christ is king and servant, priest and sacrifice, he is the one who walks first, to whom one walks toward, with whom one walks, whom one walks along. He is all things to the pilgrim: road, way, home, fellow traveler." And specifically on humility, see Augustine, *Letters* 118.17, 22. Augustine says that Christ is the preeminent example of humility, which we all need. Then he says that the only way to reach the truth is the way given by God: "That first way, however, is humility; the second way is humility, and the third way is humility."

37. See Augustine, *Confessions* IV.12.19.
38. See Augustine, *Confessions* XIII.14.15.
39. See Augustine, *Confessions* VI.5.8; VII.7.11; XI.2.4; XIII.15.16–17.
40. See Augustine, *Confessions* V.5.9; XII.16.23.
41. Augustine, *City of God* X.28.
42. See Ogle, *Earthly City*, 181.
43. See Augustine, *Confessions* XIII.23.33.
44. See Augustine, *Confessions* IX.12.37.

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In this book, we will seek to receive and pass on Augustine's wisdom, that it might aid us fellow pilgrims on our journey through this world toward our true home in God and his kingdom. His wisdom, though ancient, speaks powerfully to every generation, offering distinctive insight for navigating the disorienting terrain of late modern societies, where Christians increasingly find themselves estranged in the world.

Outline of the Book

In the chapters that follow, we will walk with Augustine as the guide for our pilgrimage, learning from his teachings on church, culture, and politics. Each section explores one of these arenas where Christians must learn how to live faithfully as citizens of the city of God.

The first section, "Church," begins from the center of Augustine's converted existence: the life of God's people, the body of Christ, mother church. We will look at his teachings on unity and discipline—how the church forms its members in humility, love, and holiness. For Augustine, the church is the vital context in which Christian pilgrims are healed and guided on their way home. We will conclude this section with some reflections on how Augustine's teachings on the church relate to Reformed Christianity.

The second section, "Culture," is the most directly engaged with the hot-button issues of our own time. Here we explore Augustine's enduring wisdom on questions that continue to shape public and private life. We begin with a discussion of cultural apologetics to set up Augustine's basic approach to addressing controversial topics and common errors in culture. From there, we turn to his reflections on sex and gender, abortion and suicide, and the Jews—topics as controversial now as they were in his own day.

The third section, "Politics," considers how Augustine's theology informs our understanding of the meaning and limits of political life. Political life is not unimportant, but it must be interpreted in

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light of God's providence and the church's central place in God's plans. Here we explore Augustine's reflections on church and state, nations and neighbors, and political responsibility—including how Christians might think about voting and civic duty. Augustine helps us see that love of neighbor extends into our public life, yet always as pilgrims who know that our true citizenship is in heaven. Political action, rightly understood, serves the mission of the church rather than replacing it.

In light of these teachings, Christian pilgrims can learn to navigate more faithfully the complex terrain of social life in this world—a world loved by God, marred by sin, redeemed through Christ, and awaiting its full renewal.

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SECTION 1

CHURCH

The division of this book into sections should not be taken to imply a clean separation between church, culture, and politics. For Augustine, these concepts overlap and interact. However, we will give special attention to each one in the sections that follow to capture key aspects of his social vision—his understanding of social relations and the shape of a good society. Here we begin with the *church*, which Augustine came to recognize as the center of the Christian's social existence.

In *The Confessions*, which is his narration of his spiritual journey, Augustine describes how he had been turned around by God to not only come home to him but also to come home to the church.[1] Augustine is well aware of how this might sound to some who might prefer to be "spiritual but not religious" and take Jesus but leave the church behind. Augustine understands these temptations and recounts a similar struggle faced by his friend Victorinus. Another friend, Simplicianus, was urging Victorinus to join him in the church. Victorinus resisted, saying he was content to read

1. See Augustine, *Confessions* VI.4.5.

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the Scriptures and already considered himself a Christian. Simplicianus replied that he would not consider Victorinus a Christian until he saw the latter in church. To this, Victorinus asked, "It's the walls that make Christians, then?"[2] Augustine tells the story in a way that suggests the answer is, in an important sense, yes—not because a building saves, but because Christian faith is inseparable from thick, tangible belonging to the body of Christ.

Victorinus's question continues to resonate in our own time, as many are increasingly skeptical about church-centered spirituality. Today many are "dechurching," or assuming they can embrace Christian spirituality without the institutional trappings of the church.[3] Victorinus reasoned similarly, but eventually he was persuaded by the Scriptures that he needed the church, and implored Simplicianus, "Let us go to church: I want to become a Christian." Augustine shares this story approvingly, as an inspiration for all Christian pilgrims.

To draw on Augustine's wisdom, we must begin with the church. For Augustine, the Christian life and pilgrim journey cannot be separated from the church. It was central to his own experience and theological convictions. To turn away from restless wandering and embark on the pilgrimage to God and his kingdom, one must begin with the body of Christ, the family of God, the fellowship of believers, the church. But what does Augustine mean by *church*?

According to Augustine, yes, the church needs walls, in a sense. You need the people—this community centered on God that the walls represent. Augustine had experienced the joy of such fellowship himself. Hear how he delights in this communal life into which he had been received by baptism: "During the days that followed I could not get enough of the wonderful sweetness that filled me as I meditated upon your deep design for the salvation

2. Augustine, *Confessions* VIII.2.4.

3. See Jim Davis and Michael Graham, with Ryan P. Burge, *The Great Dechurching: Who's Leaving, Why Are They Going, and What Will It Take to Bring Them Back?* (Zondervan, 2023).

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of the human race. How copiously I wept at your hymns and canticles, how intensely was I moved by the lovely harmonies of your singing Church! Those voices flooded my ears, and the truth was distilled into my heart until it overflowed in loving devotion; my tears ran down, and I was the better for them."[4]

From this experience, along with his study of Scripture and theological reflection, Augustine developed a high ecclesiology. He began to see allegories of its splendor scattered throughout the Old Testament. For instance, Augustine interprets the paradise of Genesis as a figure of the church.[5] And Noah's ark prefigures the nations flooding into the church.[6] These and many other historical events, he argues, were providentially ordained and recorded in Scripture as anticipations of the church—signs pointing beyond themselves to the body of Christ.[7] The church thus emerges as the true spiritual meaning of these Old Testament narratives. Moreover, Augustine catalogs a host of Old Testament prophecies, interpreting them as fulfilled in the church during this present age.[8]

To capture the importance of the church in Augustine's social vision, we must see how closely he connects it to the goal of our pilgrimage—the "glorious city of God."[9] This phrase primarily refers to the kingdom to come,[10] our "heavenly homeland," where

4. Augustine, *Confessions* IX.6.14.

5. See Augustine, *City of God* XIII.21.

6. See Augustine, *City of God* XV.27; XVI.7.

7. See Augustine, *City of God* XVI.2. In recent years, there has been a surge of interest in retrieving patristic and medieval hermeneutical approaches and exegetical methods that are more comfortable with making typological and allegorical connections beyond those explicitly made by the apostles in the New Testament documents. But even with these retrieval efforts, most evangelicals tend to restrict these connections to Christ; Augustine is much more willing to see Old Testament signs as pointing not only to Christ but also to the church.

8. This is all over book XVIII of *The City of God*. See also IX.22. See also the discussion in Paul Griffiths, "Secularity and the *Saeculum*," in *Augustine's* City of God: *A Critical Guide*, ed. James Wetzel (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 106.

9. This is obviously a central theme in his great work, *The City of God*. We will return in chapter 1 to discuss how closely he relates the church and that city.

10. See Augustine, *City of God* XII.1.

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"victory is truth, dignity is holiness, peace is felicity, and life is eternity."[11] Christians invite our neighbors to join us in this city, calling them out of the city of man—that society, not yet wholly visible, composed of those ordered by love of self above God, clinging to created goods and structuring life around worldly pride, those who live according to the flesh rather than the Spirit, preferring folly to truth[12]—to change their citizenship for their good.[13] Yet this future city also has present expression: the church on its earthly pilgrimage. The "glorious city of God" refers not only to its eternal state but also to the church during its pilgrimage here on earth.[14] According to Augustine, the church is good for the world, and salvation is closely tied to it because the blessed life is inherently social.[15]

This marks a significant shift in Augustine's thought, even after his conversion to Christianity. In his early works, he viewed salvation and the blessed life through a strongly Platonic lens, emphasizing the soul's ascent to a contemplative vision of truth—an understanding that was notably individualistic and intellectual. Beginning in the late 390s, however, Augustine reconceived the Christian life in terms of charity and communion, placing greater emphasis on fellowship within the church and participation in its sacraments.[16] The *vita beata*—the happy life—is no longer a solitary pursuit of truth but a shared life in the community of charity. Salvation, in this mature vision, means union with God and communion with the body of Christ, into which believers are received through baptism.[17] This body is not an abstract idea but

11. Augustine, *City of God* II.29.

12. See Augustine, *City of God* I.preface; VI.preface; XIV.1, 4, 28; *Expositions of the Psalms* 64.2.

13. See Augustine, *City of God* II.28–29; XIX.17.

14. See Augustine, *Literal Commentary on Genesis* XII.28.26; *City of God* I.preface; VIII.24; XIV.9, 13; XVI.2; XVII.3; XVIII.51; *Expositions of the Psalms* 90(2).1.

15. See Augustine, *City of God* XIX.3–5.

16. This shift is discussed in James K. Lee, *Augustine and the Mystery of the Church* (Fortress Press, 2017), 28–36, 101.

17. See Augustine, *Eighty-Three Questions* XXXVI.2. This work was written between the years 388 and 396.

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a visible community, "seen by all."[18] In Augustine's later theology, the visible church and its sacraments are not peripheral but essential to the Christian life.[19] Pilgrims of the city of God belong to a real, embodied community,[20] and they depend on this community, for it is here, within the body formed by baptism, that they are reformed and taught the way of charity and humility.[21] Though imperfect, God works through it and attaches profound promises to its fellowship.[22] It is essential to the life of Christian pilgrims—and a gift to the world.

In this section, we will outline major threads of Augustine's view of the church and consider their relevance to ecclesiological issues facing the church today, with particular attention to issues facing evangelical and Reformed Christianity.

18. Augustine, *Answer to Faustus, a Manichean* XIII.13. Augustine met Faustus just prior to his conversion to Christianity, after some years as a Manichean disciple.

19. See Lee, *Mystery of the Church*, 55.

20. See Griffiths, "Secularity and *Saeculum*," 34–47; Gregory W. Lee, "Republics and Their Loves: Rereading *City of God* 19," *Modern Theology* 27, no. 4 (2011): 567. See also chapter 27 in Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*.

21. See John Cavadini, "Ideology and Solidarity in Augustine's *City of God*," in Wetzel, *Augustine's* City of God, 99.

22. See Ogle, *Earthly City*, 56.

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