Milton and Augustine: 
the Rule of “Charity”

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Although Milton called attention to his “rule of charity” by including it in the sub-title of his Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce and made charity his final and deciding argument, the subject has received remarkably little careful attention. Those who have noticed it at all have usually contented themselves with a vague, general association with the concept of “Christian Liberty,” and have left the matter there. Theodore Huguelet sees Milton’s “rule of charity” as another form of the traditional protestant rule of interpretation called variously the “rule of faith” or the “analogy of faith” and sometimes the “rule of faith and charity.”¹ A more recent book takes issue with both Huguelet and the position I have advanced elsewhere,² and attempts to identify Milton’s concept of “charity” with Augustine’s doctrine of “caritas” as set forth in his De Doctrina.³

It is my purpose to analyze the concept of “caritas” in Augustine, and the “rule of faith and charity” of Christian hermeneutics, and to demonstrate that Milton’s idea and application are different from them both and essentially comprise an original approach to Biblical interpretation.

Historically, the study of “charity” begins with Augustine’s definition: “I mean by charity that affection of the mind which aims at the enjoyment of God for His own sake, and the enjoyment of one’s neighbor in subordination to God. . . .”⁴ The context of Augustine’s statement reveals clearly that Augustine means to contrast “charity” with the “love of the world,” for he continues, “By lust I mean that affection of the mind which aims at enjoying one’s self and one’s neighbor, and other corporeal things, without reference to God.”⁵ It might be

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observed that Augustine's idea was merely an expansion of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 6:19-34) in which Jesus admonished, "love not the world, neither the things that are in the world." But Augustine emphasized and expanded the idea into an all-inclusive principle. He insisted that the purpose of all scripture is "to nourish and strengthen charity, and to overcome and root out lust." Accordingly, the real significance of any passage of scripture is its contribution to the establishment of charity or overcoming its opposite—lust. Thus, charity is not just an act or an attitude; it is a state of being in which all things are subordinated to God.

As it related to Biblical interpretation, the goal of charity justified whatever means necessary to that end. Augustine affirms: "If a man fully understands that the 'end of the commandment is charity, out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned,' and is bent upon making all his understanding of Scripture to bear upon these graces, he may come to the interpretation of these books with an easy mind." George Gilbert notes that the only real test of interpretation to Augustine is, therefore, "would the proposed interpretation tend to establish the reign of love?" And Harnack, noting that Augustine's rule actually by-passed the scripture in arriving at doctrine, concludes that Augustine "declared the study of Holy Scripture to be merely the path toward love; he who possessed love, no longer needed the Scripture. . . ."

For the present discussion, the most important feature of Augustine's rule of charity is this: Augustine's emphasis is entirely spiritual and oriented to the "other world." Man's condition in the present, physical world was not nearly so important to Augustine as his prospects for the world to come. "The whole temporal dispensation for our salvation," says Augustine, "was framed by the providence of God that we might know this truth and be able to act upon it; and we ought to use that dispensation, not with such love and delight as