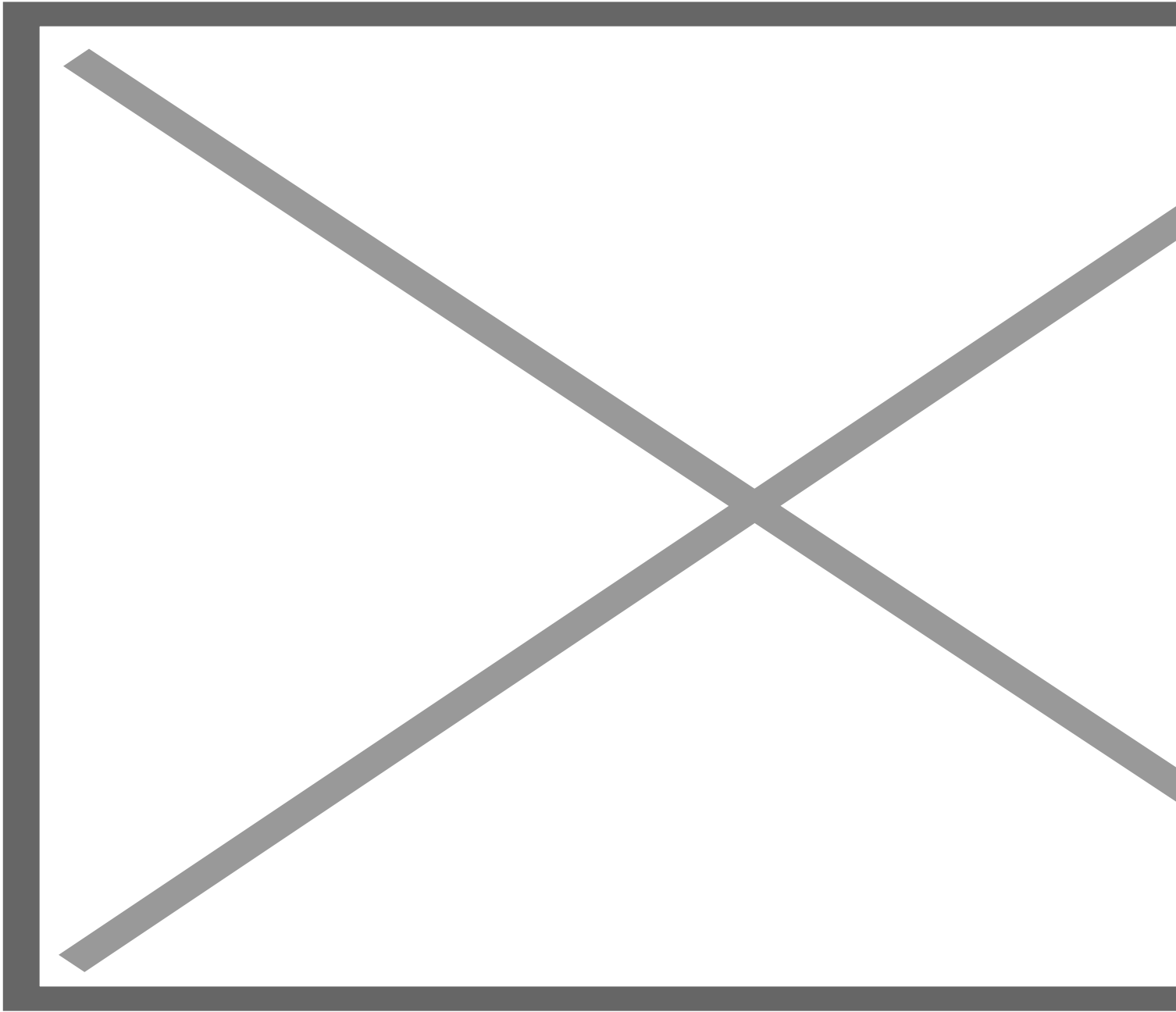


Reading scripture with Augustine

The bishop of Hippo isn't just for JD Vance and Mike Johnson—and Bible studies aren't just for evangelicals.

by [Stephanie Perdew](#) in the [June 2026](#) issue

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A detail of a public sculpture of St. Augustine in Vienna, Austria (Photo by PictureObelix / Creative Commons)

Recently I happened into a conversation with some church laypeople as another meeting concluded. The conversation drifted into how to respond to White Christian nationalism as White mainline Christians. “Give me some weapons,” one woman said. She explained that conversations with neighbors or family felt like a battle, and she needed some arrows in her quiver. I bristled at the image but remembered that Paul uses the whole armor of God as a metaphor for facing the devil (Eph. 6), including the devil of Rome, itself an instance of political and religious nationalism. And even as I bristled, I had to take seriously that people in my jurisdiction’s care feel that they are on the front lines of a battle.

One front in that battle is the Christian nationalism fueling the current presidential administration’s agenda. Administration officials invoke scripture and theology to justify their claims, policies, and beliefs.

But the people I was talking to admitted that they struggle to cite chapter and verse or to comment accurately upon epochs of Christian or American history. Afterward, I drove home in frustration, admitting to myself that we mainline Protestants have done a poor job teaching biblical literacy, our Reformation claim to fame.

We have a history of preachers and teachers who can preach and teach the saving, grace-filled, merciful themes of scripture set in the context of the long arc of Christian history. But as seminaries struggle and curricula are reconfigured, students take fewer courses in Bible and history. And even when our clergy are well-equipped to preach and teach, they face feedback that biblical preaching is boring or irrelevant to current events.

Many churches in my neck of the American Christian woods have claimed to take the Bible “seriously but not literally,” a claim intended to counter the literalism of American fundamentalism. But it turns out we haven’t taken the Bible literally *or* seriously. Go to many mainline church websites and you may find a host of activities and programs on the church calendar, but often not a Bible study in sight. Good studies and curricula exist. But odds are, in many of these churches one can participate in church events 52 weeks a year and never study scripture on a sustained basis. So it is no surprise that people feel that they cannot meet the moment when political leaders and neighbors are busy quoting scripture.

We got ourselves into this situation because we didn’t want to be confused with biblical fundamentalists, who claim to engage in a plain reading of scripture and further claim that this is the way it’s always been done. To our loss, we let our congregations believe these claims, content to cede biblical territory and to cast off into the lands of interreligious dialogue, social activism, and self-help. All are fine missions. None is done well without nourishment from the soil of scriptural literacy and biblical imagination.

This was easy enough to sustain while various presidential administrations of both parties paid at least a little attention to the common good, when our concern was about improving social programs rather than seeing social safeguards—and neighbors—literally disappear.

Now we need triage, and maybe we’ll see a small resurgence of biblical preaching and weekly Bible studies. It is not going to suffice to return proof text for proof text without a sense of scriptural or historical context. That’s simply returning an eye for an eye.

Interestingly, one of the most helpful people in our historical quiver is St. Augustine—the very same bishop that Vice President Vance and House Speaker Mike Johnson are fond of quoting. Early in the administration, Vance claimed that Augustine teaches us to order our loves with the foundation of family first, neighbor next, and immigrant last. Augustine taught no such thing, as the pope clarified. More recently Augustine’s just war theory has been invoked to legitimate a campaign that the administration hesitates to call a war, and that by no evaluation against the criteria of the theory could possibly be said to be just.

Augustine gets a bad rap in my neck of the Christian woods too. He's dismissed as one of those old church fathers, presumed to be White—despite the fact that he was a North African with Berber Indigenous roots on his mother's side, one whose first language was Punic. Justo González charts this history well in *The Mestizo Augustine*. And add to your Augustine reading list Catherine Conybeare's beautiful new *Augustine the African*.

One of the most brilliant contributions Augustine left us was concise guidance for interpreting scripture, set down in his *De doctrina Christiana (On Christian Teaching)*. There he explains that there are different meanings or “signs” in scripture, broadly, the literal and the metaphorical. But we readers have a propensity to make the metaphorical literal and the literal metaphorical, according to our own biases, cultures, worldviews, and aims. Scripture becomes a means to our ends. He warns:

If scripture enjoins something at variance with the practices of its readers, or censures something that is not at variance with them, they consider the relevant expression to be figurative (always assuming that their minds are governed by the authority of the Word). But scripture enjoins nothing but love, and censures nothing but lust, and molds [our] minds accordingly. Similarly, if their minds are taken over by a particular prejudice, people consider as figurative anything that scripture asserts to the contrary.

How to discern between the literal and the metaphorical? Augustine advises:

Therefore in dealing with figurative expressions we will observe a rule of this kind: the passage being read should be studied with careful consideration until its interpretation can be connected with the realm of love. If this point is made literally, then no kind of figurative expression need be considered.

So when 1 John says God is love (4:8), we need no metaphorical interpretation. When Jesus repeats the great commandment to love God and your neighbor as yourself, there is no sleight of hand needed to understand what he means and no excuse not to. When Moses shares the command, “When a foreigner resides in your land, do not mistreat them” (Lev. 19:33), that's what God really commands.

So here, for those who need it, is an arrow or two, as we put on the sword of the Spirit—which is the word of God (Eph. 6:10). For my part, I'm working on a new Bible study for local churches, using Augustine as a lens.