

EXCERPT

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## **Seeing by the Light**

*Illumination in Augustine's and Barth's Readings of John*

Available May 5, 2020 | \$35, 248 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-4885-0

Ike Miller (PhD, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School) is lead pastor and church planter of Bright City Church. He lives in Durham, North Carolina, with his wife, Sharon, and their three children.

## Participation in the Light

The question before us is this: "What does illumination look like in the event of an individual's encounter with Christ?" To answer the question is not to give a theoretical discussion per se, but to reflect on a narration of the event itself. Augustine presents such a reflection on the prologue, the episode with Nicodemus, the woman at the well, Jesus' confrontation with the Pharisees, and the healing of the man born blind. In each case Augustine gives insight into his theory of illumination, as investigated in the previous chapter. This attempt to give a coherent account of his doctrine will bring clarity to the intransigent debate over Augustine's theory of illumination.

**Light.** Let us begin with a review of how Augustine uses some important terms. Augustine uses the term *light* and its various forms (*lumen, lux, lumine, lucem*) extensively throughout his homilies, and in diverse ways. Augustine invokes the term and its opposite, darkness (*tenebrae*), as an analogy for everything from the illumination of the biblical authors to the brightness of eternal life and the darkness of sin and eternal perdition. With the survey of the previous chapter in mind, there are several conclusions that can be drawn about Augustine's use of the term.

First, light refers to the means by which other things are made visible and clear, that is, *intelligible*. Augustine's analogy here is the sun. By the light of the sun, other objects are made visible. Light disperses the darkness and fog of our fallen minds. It might also be included here that light is an agent of judgment. In the process of making visible or bringing clarity, light makes visible the justness or unjustness of human lives and actions.

Second, light refers to truth. Light is not only the means by which to see the truth of reality for Augustine, it is itself the truth. Augustine writes that although the Word was in the world by his divinity, the Word had to come in his humanity in order for it to be seen by the dim eyes of humanity. The light here is not only the means to make other objects visible but is itself to be an "object" of our vision. Augustine writes in his thirty-fifth homily, "The light bears testimony to itself, it opens healthy eyes, and is itself a witness to itself that it may be recognized as light." He is the way and the *truth* (Jn 14:6). Nash puts it well when he concludes that the reason illumination is not simply formal, as Gilson suggests, is that "while light illumines other objects, it also reveals something about its own nature." As the true light comes into the world, his enlightenment of human beings says something about the *true* light himself.

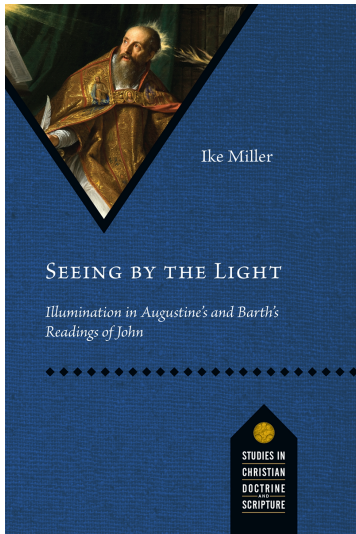
Third, light refers to humanity's own capacity for understanding. Unlike the rest of creation, humanity is set apart in that it bears the image of God by means of its intellect. This is the unique light that humanity alone possesses. Although the image of God functions prominently in some of Augustine's other discussions of illumination, he does not give it great attention in the homilies. Herman Somers makes the case, as others have, that Augustine's doctrine of the image of God is



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integral to his doctrine of illumination, and in particular, by means of a discussion of *catoptronomy*, or “mirror divinization.” Drawing from Paul’s language in 1 Corinthians 13:12, “now we see in a glass darkly,” Somers suggests that Augustine understands illumination to occur as we look at the mirror of God’s image in our soul. In these individual encounters with Christ depicted by John’s Gospel, when individuals come to see the light of Christ, or are given eyes to see Christ for who he is, they are looking into the image of God himself, Jesus Christ.

Fourth and finally, light refers to the radiance of the divine perfections. Augustine speaks frequently of the light of divine justice or the light of wisdom and of truth. The radiance of the divine perfections themselves illumine as humans participate in them and are transformed by them. Although wisdom, truth, and justice can all refer to forms or ideas in the divine mind, Augustine also speaks of them in ways that suggest that they have agency. This complicates the strictly formal view of illumination but does not dismiss it altogether. As God is the light of divine justice in himself, so God can illumine humanity with an understanding of perfect justice also. The question that naturally leads out of this is, how does this light get communicated to those in the darkness? The answer has been anticipated: by participation in the divine light.

**Participation.** Divine illumination for Augustine is accomplished by means of human participation in the divine light. Agostino Trapé writes that participation is a principle “which enters into the essential nucleus of Augustine’s thought” and that “its role is so central . . . that in order to understand creation, illumination and beatitude in Augustine, one must view them as ‘three modes of expressing the one doctrine of participation.’”

The nature of this participation can be articulated in two very different ways: (1) as a metaphysical participation in which all humans share by virtue of being human; or (2) as a soteriological participation in which one shares only by virtue of one’s union with Christ through faith and in the Holy Spirit. Here again Augustine’s Platonist philosophical background is important but not ultimately so. His indebtedness to Plato has not been overlooked, and Roland Teske goes so far as to identify the particular text of the *Phaedo* that is most influential. However, as with much of what Augustine adopts from philosophy, he radically Christianizes it. One way to think of radical Christianization would be to construe it as the move from the first to the second definition given above. No longer is participation in divinity achieved through rigorous philosophical speculation. Rather, participation in divinity is solely on the basis of the incarnation. By Christ’s assumption of humanity, humanity may now participate in divinity. Once again, incarnation and illumination are coordinated.

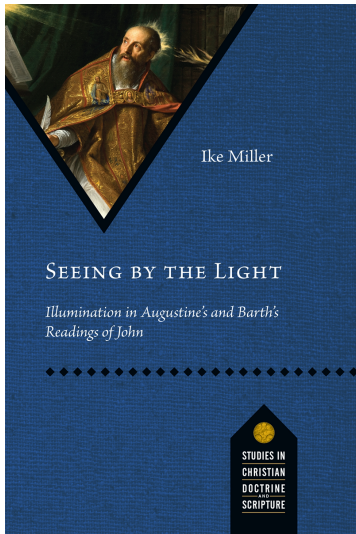
The passages that invoke the language of participation and illumination indicate the kind of participation Augustine has in mind. First, participation, as Augustine employs the concept, is non-ontological. On a passage regarding the soul’s participation in the goodness of God, he writes, “When the soul takes from God that by which it is good, by participation, it becomes good, as your eye sees by participation. For if the light is taken away, it does not see, but being made a participant in it, it sees.” That is to say, men and women may participate by justifying faith in the goodness, truth, or light



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of God and thereby be made good, made to see, made truer in the work of sanctification. Darren Sarisky refers to this as "dynamic participation."

Humans participate by grace in what God is by nature. Nevertheless, an individual's departure from the good, light, or truth of God only diminishes the goodness, light, and truth in them. Humanity is included in the experience of the goodness, light, and truth of God, but not in such a way as to contribute to or detract from the goodness, light, and truth of God by this participation. Human participation in the divine light is sharing in the luminosity of the divine light, producing clarity of understanding and judgment, without contributing ontologically to the divine light itself.

Second, participation does not involve ontological transformation. Deification is present in Augustine's thought but with substantial modification from the Greek fathers' notion of *theōsis*. Gerald Bonner makes a strong case for the centrality of the incarnation for the possibility and reality of deification according to Augustine but comes short of suggesting any ontological transformation. Though Augustine makes such apparently straightforward statements as, "To make gods those who were men, He was made man who is God," it is clear such transformation is by adoption and grace, not by nature. His homily on the prologue of John affirms this: "For we were not born of God as was that only begotten, but were adopted through his grace."

Following this, then, a third central aspect of this participation is its realization by means of our adoption in Christ. Through our adoption in Christ, made possible by the incarnation of the only begotten, we are made coheirs with Christ. Augustine informs us that, in being included in Christ's inheritance, we may take possession of God as God has taken possession of us. God possesses us as our Lord, we possess him as salvation and as light. At the center of this is the New Testament doctrine of *huiōthesia*, sonship by adoption. That our adoption invites humanity to take possession of God as light indicates both the gracious nature of the gift and the degree of our intimacy with the light. It is given by pure gratuity, but it is possessed and enjoyed as if it were a birthright. To the extent that Augustine does maintain a doctrine of deification, it is only accomplished in the life to come.

Fourth, and closely related to this emphasis on adoption as the means of participation, is this participation's production of our revitalization. "at is to say, in Augustine's theology this participation is life giving and life renewing. Gilson writes, "If we understand Augustinian illumination correctly, we must say that the illuminating action of God is a vitalizing action: Our illumination is the partaking of the Word, namely of that Life which is the light of men." In our illumination we participate in the life of the divine light, and this participation not only gives light to humanity, it also gives us life. Given the language of *regeneratio*, it is not surprising that this adoption and life—this participation—begins as a matter of baptism and rebirth.

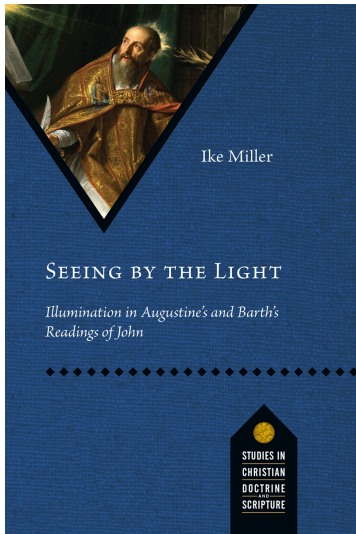


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The origin of this participation is rebirth in baptism. As stated in the previous chapter, Augustine identifies the gracious remission of sin in regeneration with the baptismal grace that purifies humanity from the guilt of all its sin. "is regeneration presupposes a faith only made possible by the grace of God in the first place. Though he does not use such language here, this grace is what Augustine refers to elsewhere as a "prevenient grace" that makes faith itself possible. The illumination that comes to humanity following regeneration is a gratuitous gift of understanding Christ and recognizing his lordship. In short, it is illumination of humanity's own sinful nature and illumination of the nature and being of God. For Augustine, the logical order of this progression is grace, faith, regeneration in baptism, and illumination. The ongoing illumination of humanity that follows is this gracious participation in the divine light.

—Taken from chapter four, "Augustine's Doctrine of Illumination"

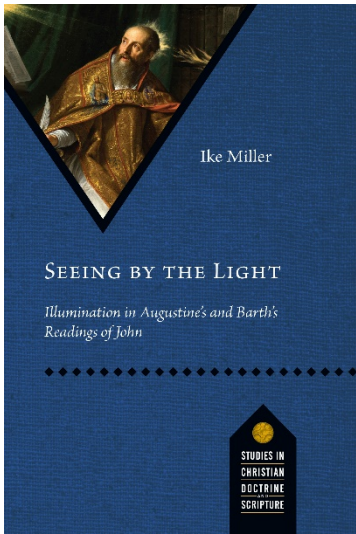


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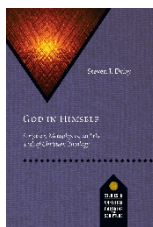
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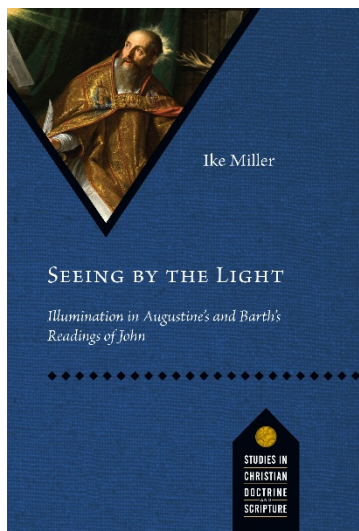


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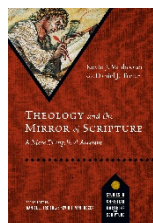
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