
The volume under review is a rough draft of what could be a good book. The author’s intent is to consider the divergent emphases within Augustine’s teachings as contextualized utterances, shaped by the particular purpose—polemical/apologetic, catechetical, homiletic, and so forth of the respective works. As the author notes, subsequent Western Christian traditions (Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and various shades of Calvinistic/Reformed) have claimed Augustine as support for their own distinctive emphases, to do this, though, entailed sidelining certain other emphases within Augustine’s teachings. Sometimes this occurred by simple neglect; at other times, this was achieved by claims that Augustine himself had moved beyond earlier positions (which he no longer endorsed). This latter approach has been seen as authorized, in large part, by
Augustine himself in his *Retractions*, in which he recognized growth in his understanding and critiqued some of his earlier perspectives. However, Ellingsen claims that the various divergent emphases in Augustine can actually be reconciled by focusing on the contexts into which Augustine wrote if, instead of seeking a systematic consistency in thought one is open to divergent emphases occasioned by differing contexts, the various strands of Augustine’s teachings can be correlated (if not entirely harmonized).

This is an ambitious project, for it challenges the way Augustine has been read and interpreted for centuries. It holds ecumenical promise, and, as Ellingsen points out, it might allow the divergent streams in Western Christian teaching to acknowledge a common indebtedness to the North African church father without falling into squabbles about who has the “genuine” Augustine. Were that to occur, one might hope for greater respect and rapprochement among those differing streams of the Augustinian tradition. If the author could demonstrate his point convincingly, it would force a rethinking of Augustine’s emphases and his legacy, which would be a major accomplishment and a significant contribution to scholarship.

This book does not deliver on its promise, though. It is not that the author fails to interact widely with Augustine’s writings: Indeed, his notes are awash in citations to most of Augustine’s corpus. The major problem is that the author fails to express his own ideas clearly. Vague, unexplained allusions hardly help. To state, “A kind of Pauline Law-Gospel distinction was implied” in Augustine’s use of allegory (16), without specifying how that Pauline distinction should be understood (given the wide divergences in emphasis among New Testament scholarship on that score), obfuscates rather than elucidates. Additionally, how does the imprecise term *implies* advance understanding? Further, unclear and awkward sentences abound. (The margins of my copy are awash in my handwritten notations to that effect.) Too often, arguments remain unconvincing because they are not cogently drawn. At times, the alert reader feels as if he is watching a mountain goat on a steep cliff, wondering how it got from the previous point to the next one (and why it stopped there anyway). Gaffes in expression suggest muddled thought: what kind of time warp would allow a historian to urge, “Echoing the Lutheran Reformation’s Theology of the Cross, Augustine exhorts us. . . “ (24)? Moreover, word choice and phrasing are frequently haphazard: It often seems as if they were grabbed off the shelf in the dark. Instead of the precision in thought and clarity in expression one should rightly expect in a scholarly work (and especially one that purports to take on and revise a longstanding scholarly pattern), in this book, the reader encounters fuzzy presentation of thought and a maddening translucence in wording. In a work such as this, words and arguments should be like arrows that strike the bull’s eye; in this volume, words and arguments are more like hand-grenades (near enough will do the trick). This is not just stylistic fussiness: It gets at the heart of convincing scholarship. If an author is not even careful with his own thought, can a reader have any confidence that the author is representing the
thought of another (Augustine) carefully? If an author uses words sloppily, is it likely that he is alert to nuances in a rhetor the likes of Augustine?

Perhaps Ellingsen is really on to something significant in Augustine. However, this book does not allow a reader to find that out. The author should have availed himself of the services of a painstaking editor, and if the author did not, then surely the publisher should have.

—James R. Payton, Jr.