

Lying: An Augustinian Theology of Duplicity by Paul J. Griffiths. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2004. Pp. 254. \$18.99 paperback.

In this learned study, Paul J. Griffiths presents an Augustinian perspective on lying, which he knows will prove unpopular. In the final chapter of the book, Griffiths raises classical questions about lying and provides uncompromising Augustinian answers: “Should I lie to save the life of my child? No. Should I lie to prevent war, encourage peace, soothe the weary and discouraged, instruct the foolish, or liberate the innocent from torture? No” (230). According to Griffiths, “The consistent Augustinian cannot lie to save innocent life, whether one or a million; he cannot lie to comfort the sad, preserve public order, prevent physical suffering, or even to prevent apostasy or blasphemy” (230). Griffiths is persuaded by what he repeatedly calls Augustine’s “exceptionless ban” on lying. Even readers who are not persuaded by the exceptionless ban will benefit from the historical survey and ethical challenge Griffiths provides in this erudite work.

Griffiths’ book contains two major sections followed by a shorter and less satisfying final section. In the first main section, Augustine on the Lie, Griffiths devotes his first chapter to describing Augustine’s view on lying. The key concept for Augustine’s view on lying is duplicity. In Augustinian thought, duplicity is “the evil proper to lying,” Griffiths explains (29). For Augustine, “the lie is deliberately duplicitous speech, insincere speech that deliberately contradicts what its speaker takes to be true” (32). This emphasis on intentional duplicity distinguishes lying from other possible forms of falsehood such as errors, jokes, metaphors, and fiction. Augustine also distinguishes lying from silent refusals to speak, and this allows him to exonerate Abraham and Isaac from lying about their wives in the biblical passages of Genesis 12, 20, and 26. Griffiths describes Augustine’s view as “a relatively minimalistic definition” (31) of lying, but within this minimalistic definition, Augustine places lying under an exceptionless ban. As Griffiths explains later in the book, for Augustine, the sin of lying is worse than any harm that may follow from truth telling.

In the remaining chapters of his first section, Griffiths skillfully relates Augustine’s exceptionless ban of lying to several main themes in Augustine’s theology. Perhaps most important is the relationship between speech and Augustine’s hierarchical view of the order of being. Within Augustine’s view of a hierarchically ordered reality, truths hold a very high position because they exist in the mind of God. To choose to tell a lie over telling the truth is to fail to assent to the order of being under God. Liars, then, express disordered love, which goes to the essence of sin. Sin contradicts the love of God, and therefore sin is never justified. Lying is a paradigmatic sin, and it, too, is never justified. Lying contradicts the reason God gives human creatures the gift of speech. Liars attempt to expropriate the gift of speech from God; their lying expresses a human desire for autonomy, and this desire is always false and wrong. Trying to possess language by lying is incompatible with trying to possess—that is,

enjoy loving intimacy with—God. “All possession and all control must be disowned if the lie is to be abandoned,” Griffiths concludes (100).

Griffiths completes his first section with a fascinating chapter called “Storytelling,” in which he explicates a play by Sophocles called *Philoctetes*. Augustine does not, to Griffiths’ knowledge, ever comment on this play, and this could lead the reader to wonder why Griffiths treats the play within a study of Augustine’s theology of duplicity. For this reader, however, any such objection is overcome by the illuminating presentation Griffiths makes of Sophocles’ tragedy and by the light it sheds on lying as opposed to truthful forms of speech. This chapter also includes insightful comments on poems by Geoffrey Hill and George Herbert, and the entire book evidences wide reading and much knowledge on Griffiths’ part. This erudition adds to the quality of the book.

Griffiths’ erudition serves the reader well when he goes on, in the second major section of the book, to give an Augustinian commentary on major historical figures, ranging from Plato to Nietzsche. In these “Augustinian Readings” of thinkers who have written about lying, Griffiths does not set out to deliver a knockout blow against perspectives that differ from Augustine’s. Instead, he attempts to depict the different views in a way that suggests what is at stake in pursuing these differences. He does hope that the church will listen to Augustine’s views and find them compelling or, as he says, seductive. This would help the church live as a community of truth, which is the theme in Griffiths’ third and shortest section of the book. This third section of the book includes a one-sidedly negative depiction of modernity and the United States, and here Griffiths falters. His description of modernity and American society includes several accurate criticisms of specific problems, but it is unbalanced to the point of being distorted. Griffiths’ view here strikes me as a postmodern caricature of modernity.

My major question to Griffiths, however, applies not to his view of modernity but to his central topic, the Augustinian view that places lying under an exceptionless ban. In his survey of other thinkers, Griffiths includes several Christian thinkers, including Chrysostom, Jerome, and Aquinas and explores their differing views not only of lying but also of speech. Griffiths argues that their justification for lying—or, in Aquinas’ case, his view that lying can be a venial, as opposed to a mortal sin—in certain situations flows from a failure to acknowledge, as Augustine does, the God-given purpose of speech. Because these Christian thinkers do not think in Christian ways about speech, Griffiths argues, they fall into sub-Christian perspectives with respect to lying. Griffiths makes a convincing case for this critique, especially in the cases of Chrysostom and Jerome. However, a version of Griffiths’ critique of other Christian thinkers may also apply to Augustine himself.

Griffiths shows that Augustine does attempt to formulate specifically Christian views of speech, truth telling, and lying. The problem is, Platonism heavily influences these views, and one could make a biblical argument that to evaluate speech, truth telling, and lying, as Augustine does, within the frame-

work of a hierarchy of ordered being misses the biblical pattern of viewing such matters within the realm of social justice. “Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor,” the author of Ephesians commands, and then he gives the following rationale: “for we are all members of one body” (Eph. 4:25). In the Decalogue and in the Sermon on the Mount, truth telling is commanded and lying forbidden in a way that also relates to concern for social justice. Perhaps this emphasis on justice for our neighbors as opposed to a hierarchy of being is one reason why the Bible seems to portray in a favorable light the midwives who lied to Pharaoh in order to save Hebrew babies (Exodus 1) and Rahab, who lied to save the Israelite spies (Joshua 4). Griffiths does describe briefly Augustine’s interpretation of these passages, but, in these cases, the great theologian’s exegesis is not convincing. In other words, Augustine’s exceptionless ban on the lie is not biblical.

Based on these and other biblical arguments, I respectfully disagree with Augustine’s exceptionless ban on the lie. I remain convinced that lying to save human lives can be justified. However, I find in both Augustine’s writings and in Griffiths’ presentation of them a welcome and necessary call to truth telling and to the formation of the church into a community of truth (226). Griffiths rightly observes, “If my conscience has been systematically malformed, as it inevitably has by the culture of autonomy and ownership in which I live, then a reformation of it will be radical” (230-31). Those who would justify lying for the sake of saving human lives can certainly join Augustine and Griffiths in this radical reformation of our consciences and our speaking. We can say “Amen” to Griffiths when, on the basis of seeing speech as a gift from God, he states, “loquacity will have to give place to silence, and self-assertion to praise” (231).

—Joel Kok