



On Grace and Free Will

Augustine of Hippo

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From the Abstract:

"In this treatise Augustine teaches us to beware of maintaining grace by denying free will, or free will by denying grace; for that it is evident from the testimony of Scripture that there is in man a free choice of will; and there are also in the same Scriptures inspired proofs given of that very grace of God without which we can do nothing good. Afterwards, in opposition to the Pelagians, he proves that grace is not bestowed according to our merits. He explains how eternal life, which is rendered to good works, is really of grace. He then goes on to show that the grace which is given to us through our Lord Jesus Christ is neither the knowledge of the law, nor nature, nor simply remission of sins; but that it is grace that makes us fulfil the law, and causes nature to be liberated from the dominion of sin. He demolishes that vain subterfuge of the Pelagians, to the effect that "grace, although it is not bestowed according to the merits of good works, is yet given according to the merits of the antecedent good-will of the man who believes and prays." He incidentally touches the question, why God commands what He means Himself to give, and whether He imposes on us any commands which we are unable to perform. He clearly shows that the love which is indispensable for fulfilling the commandments is only within us from God himself. He points out that God works in men's hearts to incline their wills whithersoever He willeth, either to good works according to his mercy, or to evil ones in return for their deserving; His judgment, indeed, being sometimes manifest, sometimes hidden, but always righteous. Lastly, he teaches us that a clear example of the gratuitousness of grace, not given in return for our deserts, is supplied to us in the case of those infants which are saved, while others perish though their case is identical with that of the rest."

On Grace and Free Will Details

Date : Published (first published December 8th 2005)

ISBN :

Author : Augustine of Hippo

Format : Kindle Edition

Genre : Religion, Theology, Philosophy, Christian, Christianity, Nonfiction, Catholic

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From Reader Review On Grace and Free Will for online ebook

Logan says

Possibly the first to really explore the idea of how man's inability and responsibility work together, I found it surprisingly lucid and free from metaphysical speculation as most of Augustine's writings seem to contain.

Well worth the read. It is the concept in seed form perhaps, but pretty well developed nonetheless.

Brittany Petruzzi says

St. Augustine is, as you might suppose, at his best here in combatting the Pelagian heresy. Where I thought he fell short was in his discussion of the roles of grace and free will. Everything he said was right, he just didn't say everything that he might have said. Perhaps he wades in further in another of his works.

Peter Bradley says

Please give my review a helpful vote - <https://www.amazon.com/review/R2R9UUM...>

On Grace and Free Will by St. Augustine.

The book opens with Augustine learning that two factions of monks are warring in their monastery about grace and free will. One group says that free will plays no role in salvation, while the other argues that human effort plays some role. The argument is intense. Since both sides are quoting Augustine, he invites the wrong side – the grace only side – to spend some time with him so that he can straighten things out. He writes:

““1. Two young men, Cresconius and Felix, have found their way to us, and, introducing themselves as belonging to your brotherhood, have told us that your monastery was disturbed with no small commotion, because certain amongst you preach grace in such a manner as to deny that the will of man is free; and maintain—a more serious matter—that in the day of judgment God will not render to every man according to his works. At the same time, they have pointed out to us, that many of you do not entertain this opinion, but allow that free will is assisted by the grace of God, so as that we may think and do aright; so that, when the Lord shall come to render unto every man according to his works, He shall find those works of ours good which God has prepared in order that we may walk in them. They who think this think rightly.”

This is a seminal and surprising work. It is surprising because Augustine is usually presented as a forerunner of Lutheran and Calvinist predestination. Augustine, however, makes sure to carve out a place for both human effort and for divine grace. Augustine writes:

“Chapter 18.—Faith Without Good Works is Not Sufficient for Salvation. Unintelligent persons, however, with regard to the apostle's statement: “We conclude that a man is justified by faith without the works of the law,” have thought him to mean that faith suffices to a man, even if he lead a bad life, and has no good works. Impossible is it that such a character should be deemed “a vessel of election” by the apostle, who, after declaring that “in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision,” adds at once, “but faith which worketh by love.” It is such faith which severs God's faithful from unclean

demons,—for even these “believe and tremble,” as the Apostle James says; but they do not do well. Therefore they possess not the faith by which the just man lives,—the faith which works by love in such wise, that God recompenses it according to its works with eternal life. But inasmuch as we have even our good works from God, from whom likewise comes our faith and our love, therefore the selfsame great teacher of the Gentiles has designated “eternal life” itself as His gracious “gift.” “

The goal of Augustine in this book is to explain how grace can square with free will. Is he successful? Yes and no.

Augustine is successful in the sense that he is bound by – as are we – our experience that we do make some contribution to our salvation through our efforts. This intuition is supported by logic. As Augustine asks:

“Now, I would ask, if there is no grace of God, how does He save the world? and if there is no free will, how does He judge the world?”

Free will is required for there to be justice, i.e. for there to be reward. Obedience and reward, moreover, is attested throughout Christian scripture. Augustine anticipates Erasmus’s debate with Luther in this passage:

“All these commandments, however, respecting love or charity (which are so great, and such that whatever action a man may think he does well is by no means well done if done without love) would be given to men in vain if they had not free choice of will.

And:

“Nor does it detract at all from a man’s own will when he performs any act in accordance with God. Indeed, a work is then to be pronounced a good one when a person does it willingly; then, too, may the reward of a good work be hoped for from Him concerning whom it is written, “He shall reward every man according to his works.”

On the other hand, grace is also found throughout scripture as well. So however, the two are to be squared, they must both remain in any biblical Christian theological system.

Where does grace play a role in Augustine’s view? Presumably by attracting or inspiring individuals to love God and do good:

“It Pleases Him. I think I have now discussed the point fully enough in opposition to those who vehemently oppose the grace of God, by which, however, the human will is not taken away, but changed from bad to good, and assisted when it is good.”

Ultimately, how this all works remains a deep mystery that is referred to, in Augustine’s words, to the “secret judgments of God.”

I found this to be a surprisingly accessible work, but I am also presently reading the section on grace in Aquinas’ Summa Theologica, and I have read other works by Augustine. Someone without that background might find the text less accessible.

Brian Morin says

Great to read the early thoughts on this difficult topic, and to know that they have not changed too much in

the last thousand years...

Nick says

This is a great book for understanding the foundations of a Reformed view of free will. I am not Reformed (at least not in terms of TULIP) I am Wesleyan-Arminian in my soterology. That being said, Uncle Augie is about 90% compatible with that point of view. He certainly combats the hated Pelagian heresy well. I will try to give this theological classic the treatment it deserves at a later point, but for now let me just say that it is a book that Christians should think through even if we disagree on some of it in the end.

Blake D says

Augustine for Today

Augustine is so readable in this work. He has a way of question and dialogue with himself that helps you to work it through yourself.

Adam Smith says

Didn't wholesale agree on every point. Overall a good defense of the Calvinistic understanding of free will and the role of grace.

James G McAllister says

Reason & Reasonability

Very helpful & clarifying. I am Arminian & we are sometimes lumped with Pelagians. This book points out the heresies of the Pelagians clearly- & I don't share them. Augustine doesn't separate Grace & Free Will- in fact, he regards them as indispensable to one another. That is very helpful.

Anita Keatts says

Good reading

I had to read this for a class. It was good reading. I enjoyed his perspective on the law only being kept through grace

Glen says

This book represents Augustine's polemic against the Pelagian heresy. It is a compilation of biblical texts that represent a sound argument for human will under the guidance of divine grace. I found Augustine's commentary a good balance between ultimate reliance on God yet acknowledging the critical role of human will in the process.

Pelagian humanism was soundly refuted without going to the extreme (i.e., in my interpretation) of destroy the concept of man's volition that is better represented in Arminian thought.

Derek Vonigas says

Amazing work against the Pelagian heresy. Read in the context of the other church writings, it is fantastic.

Vaughn says

Outstanding in its readability and its depth. In this book, St. Augustine handles the age old question and implications of God's sovereign grace and human kind's free will.

He incorporates several Old and New Testament Scriptures as well as the Apocryphal writings to guide his discussion and lead to his conclusion. Augustine's work is a classic treasure, in which there is much gold. In spite of the topic's difficulty, Augustine's handling of it is full of grace and truth and is written in a way that even the untrained can easily understand.

My one minor criticism is that the Scripture references are not labeled with Book, Chapter, and Verse. That said, if you've read the Scriptures, you'll know mostly which verses he is leaning upon.

I highly recommend it for the Protestant as well as the Catholic.
