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Augustine's Conversion from Traditional Free Choice to "Non-free Free Will"

A Comprehensive Methodology



Kenneth M. Wilson

Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, May 2018. 388 pages. \$100.00. Hardcover. ISBN 9783161557538.

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Review

In *Augustine's Conversion from Traditional Free Choice to "Non-free Free Will: A Comprehensive Methodology,"* Kenneth M. Wilson provides a systematic review of Augustine's work regarding free will. Aiming to fill a gap in scholarly studies, Wilson dives into the saint's consideration of original sin, faith and perseverance as divine gifts, and the extent of God's will and foreknowledge as it relates to salvation.

Wilson takes a chronological approach, starting with the predominant thinkers who set the stage for Augustine. He reviews early Christian thought from 95–430 CE, from Ignatius to Irenaeus, Origen of Alexandria to Ambrose of Milan. Here, Wilson argues, "Early Christian authors 'unanimously' taught relational eternal predetermination wherein God elected persons according to foreknowledge of their faith (predestination), in opposition to Stoic Providence and Gnostic/Manichaean unilateral determinism" (273). Wilson also summarizes these latter views, along with Neoplatonism and Pelagianism, as pertains to the potential influence they had on Augustine's understanding of free will.

These concise, clearly written synopses are well organized and rely heavily on primary-source quotations in Greek, Latin, German, and French. So too does the summary of Augustine's relevant treatises, sermons, letters, and exegesis that ensues. Herein Wilson deconstructs the traditional view that Augustine "developed his famous doctrines about 396 CE while writing *ad Simplicianum* as a result of studying scripture" (1). Rather, Wilson contends, Augustine's theology of salvation developed in three stages. The first focused on God's foreknowledge of merit, while the second shifted to God's foreknowledge of faith. The third and final stage demonstrated a decisive break from early Christian thought as Augustine settled on "unilateral election devoid of foreknowledge" (274).

Wilson suggests that Augustine's changing soteriology was a result of his efforts to refute prominent secular thought as well as address pastoral concerns. Seeing this as a failure of systematic thought and falling away from scripture, Wilson is quick to point out logical fallacies and highlight the solitary nature of Augustine's approach. At one point, he reckons, "Augustine studied scripture only enough to feed and protect his flock" (271). Readers with pastoral sensitivities may sympathize with Augustine, who sought to comfort grieving mothers of stillborn babies or other unbaptized children who had passed prematurely and whose destinies were unknown. In these moments, Wilson's factual writing style and straightforward approach can be startling.

What Wilson lacks in graceful transitions he makes up for in breadth. Indeed, the appendix is a treasure trove, not limited to an index of references and list of Augustine's works, but also including a list of Christian authors and works relating to traditional free choice from 95–430 CE. In addition, Wilson provides a brief outline of the logical and chronological development of Augustine's later theology as it relates to the topic at hand.

By its conclusion, *Augustine's Conversion from Traditional Free Choice to "Non-free Free Will"* leaves readers with more questions than answers. Why is maintaining free will so important to Augustine's predecessors? What is the role of faith in baptism and the role of baptism in salvation? Are faith and salvation gifts? Whom did Christ die for, and what did this accomplish? This volume, however, does not seek to explore these questions. The far-reaching implications of Augustine's changing perspective will enamor other scholars, who will surely use the current volume as a foundational resource; after all, these historical bones may yet be enlivened with theological, biblical, and ecclesiological meat. For less advanced students, pastors, and lay readers, a more accessible version of this doctoral thesis has been published as *The Foundation of Augustinian-Calvinism*.

About the Reviewer(s):

Catherine Tobey is an independent scholar.

Date of Review:

January 31, 2022

About the Author(s)/Editor(s)/Translator(s):

Kenneth M. Wilson is currently a Board Certified Orthopaedic Hand Surgeon in Salem, Oregon and Professor of Church History and Systematic Theology at Grace School of Theology in The Woodlands, Texas.

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