Introduction

An enormous earthquake rocked North Africa at the end of the fourth century and its repercussions continue to be felt throughout the world today. The epicenter of the quake was an unlikely place, the quiet study of a newly appointed priest named Aurelius Augustine, in the city of Hippo. The first rumbles began around 396, as Augustine wrestled with the biblical teachings of grace, election, and the freedom of the will. His conclusions sent tremors through monasteries from North Africa to France and influenced the development of religious, philosophical, psychological, and even political thought for the next 1600 years. Henry Chadwick, noted historian of the early church, credits him with influencing Anselm, Aquinas, Calvin, Luther, Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche. He claims Augustine's psychological analysis even "anticipated parts of Freud."[1] Many scholars believe Augustine shaped Western theology like no other person in church history, since the apostle Paul. His ideas were important in the foundation of the Catholic Church, but they also inspired the great Reformers. Many of the issues that are still being hotly debated in the church today find their roots in the varying interpretations of the teaching of Augustine.

None of those issues have stirred up more debate over the centuries than his doctrines of grace, election, and free will. Was man's destiny preordained by God's elective decrees before the foundation of the world, or is he the "captain of his own ship"? Does God love all of his creation or only the elect? Do we have limited autonomy or are we so dependent on him that we cannot do anything good unless his grace causes us to do it? Are we puppets, with God pulling our strings, or is it possible that even God himself doesn't know for sure what is going to happen next? These are just a few of the questions that emerge from a study of Augustine's writings.

1. Chadwick, *Augustine: Short Introduction*, 4.

Despite his enormous influence on Western Christianity, most Christians, including most pastors and church leaders, know very little about what he wrote. One reason for this deficit is the vast amount of writing attributed to Augustine. He was a prolific author and the sheer volume of his writings has been compared to a theological Swiss Alps. Since it would take many books to study all the topics he covered, this book will focus on his doctrines of grace and election, with particular interest in their relationship to his theory of free will. Most scholars readily agree that Augustine's doctrines of election and grace went through major changes as he wrote. Augustine himself confessed to frequent vacillations in his views, saying, "I admit that I try to be of the number of those who write by advancing in knowledge, and advance by writing."[2] There is, however, a great deal of disagreement over how these changes affected his theory of free will.

There are at least three different approaches to evaluating Augustine's theories of free will. The first approach seeks continuity by interpreting his later predestinarian teaching in light of his early teachings on the freedom of the will. Eugene Portalié and Etienne Gilson are two scholars who advocate this approach. Portalié denies accusations that Augustine, «sacrificed freedom of the will on the altar of divine determinism.»[3] He insists, "Augustine never retracted his principal ideas on freedom of choice; he never modified his thought on the factor which is its essential condition, that is, the complete power of choosing or determining itself."[4] Gilson agrees, "we have never been able to find the least change, philosophically speaking, in any of his major ideas."[5] He believes that all of Augustine's works present grace as "irresistible without being constraining."[6] This approach argues that Augustine's early concept of free will remained consistent to the very end.

The second approach seeks continuity by attempting to harmonize Augustine's early and later works with each other. Carol Harrison suggests Augustine's early view of the will, "never shared the classical ideal of human autonomy and self determination," that some scholars have attributed

2. Augustine, *Letter 143*, 150.
3. Portalié, *Guide*, 197.
4. Ibid.
5. Gilson, *Christian Philosophy*, 310–11.
6. Ibid., 155.

to it. She denies there was a dramatic break in his later theology.[7] Eugene TeSelle hopes to avoid inconsistencies between the early and later works by suggesting that God's gifts of faith and love never involved immediate divine action on the will. Grace in the later works merely produced an inclination to believe that could be consented to or dissented from.[8] John Burnaby says Augustine always resisted the idea of the compelled will and claims the final theological system which goes by his name, "is in great part a cruel travesty of Augustine's deepest and most vital thought."[9] Burnaby and TeSelle both admire the majority of his writings, yet wish that he had included stronger language about the possibility of refusing grace. They admit, however, the texts may not support such a possibility.[10]

This brings us to the third approach, where scholars like James Wetzel, John Rist, William Babcock, and J. Patout Burns suggest Augustine's later doctrines of grace and election call into question his early theory of free will. Wetzel argues that TeSelle and Burnaby's attempt to amend Augustine's view of grace to make grace resistible is, "endeavoring to do surgery with a meat ax. Little of Augustine's thought after 396 would survive the operation."[11] He sees incongruity between Augustine's early commitment to "voluntary willing" and his later allowance for "involuntary sin." He alleges that Augustine's later view "departs significantly" from his early view.[12] Rist sees the impossibility of refusing grace, found in Augustine's later works, as something which poisons his entire position.[13] Babcock suggests the notion that sin must be a voluntary act of the will, began to slip from Augustine's grasp after his debate with Fortunatus.[14] Burns finds changes after *To Simplician* do not express a harmonious development of previously stated principles, but rather, a replacement of early principles "by their contraries."[15]

The varied approaches of these Augustinian scholars reveal to us the nature of the debate we are entering. This book proposes that the

7. Harrison, *Rethinking*, 19.
8. TeSelle, *Augustine the Theologian*, 330–1.
9. Burnaby, *Amor Dei*, 231.
10. Wetzel, *Augustine and the Limits of Virtue*, 200.
11. Ibid., 202.
12. Ibid., 97.
13. Ibid., 201.
14. Babcock, "Augustine on Sin and Moral Agency," 35.
15. Burns, *Development*, 8.

key issue in this debate is whether or not the human will has freedom to dissent from either the influence of carnal lust or the drawing of God's grace. Augustine's early writings appear to affirm the will's ability to either assent to or dissent from the perceptions, desires and influences which present themselves to it.[16] His later writings, on the other hand, tend to present God as the one who predetermines human wills. This move to the eternal predestinating decree, argues Creswell, "effectively destroyed human free choice of the will . . . and results in a redefinition of freedom and freedom of the human will."[17] We will evaluate whether this judgment is warranted. Eleonore Stump speculates that Augustine could have maintained both his early and late views without any contradiction if he had continued to claim that the will was able to reject the grace of God, but she admits Augustine's view of predestination might not have allowed him to accept this adjustment.[18] This will be the most important issue we will explore in this book. Does Augustine allow the will power to say, "No" to the drawing influence of grace? If he does not, then in what sense does he affirm freedom of the will?

The young Augustine clearly defended freedom of the will against Manichean determinism, but his opponents, who believe his latter theories of grace and election compromised his teachings on the free will, accuse him of renouncing freedom of the will in his later works. Augustine continued to defend free will in his later works, *Retractations*[19] and the *Gift of Perseverance*,[20] Yet, on another occasion claimed he had "labored in defense of the free choice of the human will; but the grace of God conquered."[21]

We will study Augustine's works chronologically in order to understand how developments in his doctrines of grace and election influenced his understanding of the free will, especially its power to say "No." This study will include a liberal number of quotes from Augustine's works, so that he is allowed to speak for himself. We will, of course, attempt to exegete the meaning of his words to grasp what he is teaching. We will

16. Creswell, *St. Augustine's Dilemma*, 69.
17. Ibid., 105–6.
18. Stump, "Augustine on Free Will," 141–2.
19. Augustine, *Retractations*, 1.8.3.
20. Augustine, *Gift of Perseverance*, 20.52–53.
21. Augustine, *Retractations*, 2.27.

explore the modifications he made along the way, paying particular attention to crucial moments of major change. Finally, we will make some judgments as to whether these varied positions can be reconciled into a consistent theological system or whether they devolve into contradictory theories marked by inconsistency.