The Way That Leads There

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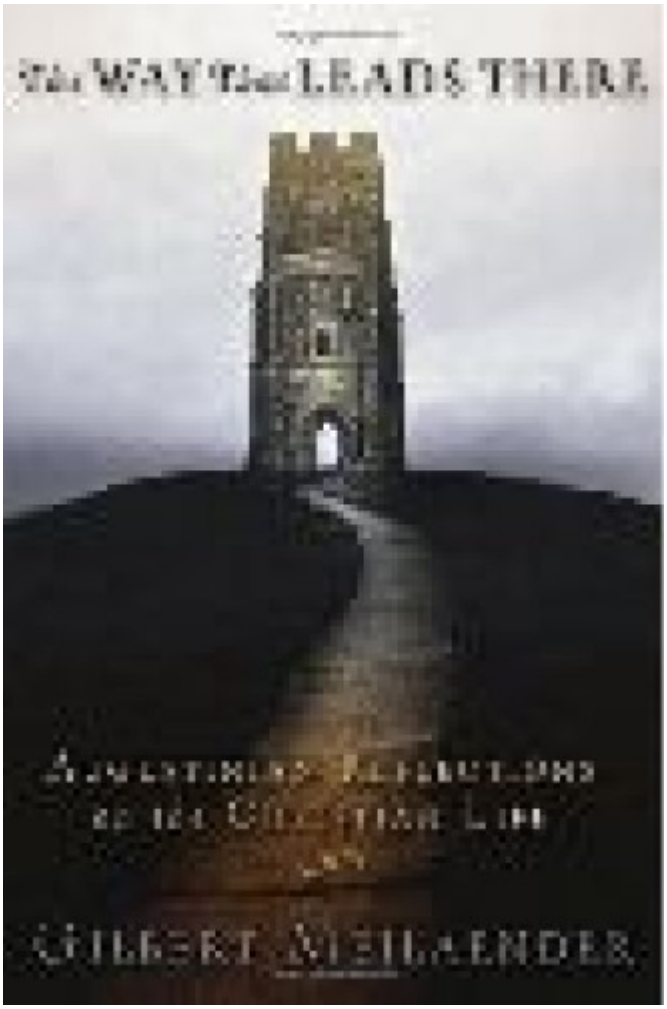
In Review



The Way That Leads There: Augustinian Reflections on the Christian Life

Gilbert Meilaender
Eerdmans

There is much to celebrate in this important new book by one of the finest moral theologians writing today. Gilbert Meilaender of Valparaiso University gives us a fine example of “thinking with Augustine” about such crucial topics as desire, duty, sex and grief. A chapter on each engages the scholarly literature without getting bogged down in it. The book’s final word on method laments academia’s obsession with methodological questions and suggests that we dive right into the big ones. This ex post facto explanation shows the glory of the book: Meilaender wants to make strong arguments about the morally weighty questions that vex our lives. I often take the opposite interpretive fork in the road from the one Meilaender chooses, but wrestling with him is always salutary, and his method deserves wide emulation.

The book’s popular appeal does not mean that it is without scholarly merit. Meilaender engages the philosopher Martha Nussbaum on the question of whether Augustine’s is a totalitarian God for whom love of other creatures is finally subsumed into love of God, so that in heaven (and by implication in this life also) the saint has no need of anyone other than God. It is a real joy to watch Meilaender addressing Nussbaum’s potentially damning indictment of Augustine and granting its power before gracefully disagreeing. Meilaender is erudite without being pedantic.

The chapter on sex may be the strongest. Meilaender, a Lutheran, wants to agree with Roman Catholics who oppose artificial means of reproduction while disagreeing with them on the legitimacy of birth control. He sees Augustine’s condemnation of sex for pleasure alone as the source of the continuing link between Catholic prohibitions on birth control and artificial reproduction: “By driving a wedge between the desire to give oneself lovingly and passionately in the sexual act and the (rationally willed) purpose of producing a child, [Augustine] invites us to think of the child as a product.” Meilaender suggests that we think of sex as we do of food: it has a good biological end and may also be enjoyed for its own sake.

The chapter on grief is not as clever or original, but it effectively illustrates another aspect of Meilaender’s method. He cites portions of Augustine’s work and that of his critics that suggest that grief is inappropriate for Christians since earthly life doesn’t count for much compared to heaven. He then reaches into other portions of Augustine’s vast oeuvre to show potentially neglected resources suggesting that creation is not to be so lightly disregarded and that there is a place for rightful grief.

The chapter on grief also illustrates my primary frustration with the book. Meilaender falls into an old habit of Augustinian scholarship: seeing in Augustine a barely Christianized Platonism, with a sharp and almost insurmountable distinction between this world and the next. Meilaender is then a bit too quick to correct Augustine to make him more this-worldly, when a glance at the christological heart of Augustine's work would have sufficed.

For example, Meilaender writes with great respect of Anders Nygren's book *Agape and Eros*, in which Nygren argues that Augustine's conversion "produced no essential change" from his Platonist self-absorption. Meilaender says only that we may "eventually want to question" Nygren, but most scholars have wanted to question him much sooner and quite sharply. Meilaender's worry is that pure eudaemonism—the ancient position that the moral life is primarily about becoming happy—can suggest that all human longing and even religion are one and the same. His real concern here is the bogeyman of theological liberalism, described by George Lindbeck as "experiential expressivism," in which all religions seek the same thing—happiness—but by different means.

In the chapter on duty, Meilaender focuses on Augustine's ban on lying, largely in conversation and disagreement with Paul Griffiths's brilliant recent book on the topic. Here Meilaender finds Augustine inconsistent, for there are some ways of concealing or misleading that even Augustine permits (a point that Meilaender tends to assume rather than demonstrate). Then Meilaender suggests that Augustine and Griffiths are simply wrong—that deceitful words can be uttered for the sake of the upbuilding of community just as well as truthful ones can. Meilaender goes further to say that Dietrich Bonhoeffer should have suffered no guilty conscience for lying to subvert the Nazis, for it was simply the right thing to do. He then finds in Augustine's absolution of Old Testament saints for their lies (after all, they lived before the full revelation of God in Christ) a possible Augustinian loophole that would allow for greater gentleness than Augustine's otherwise exceptionless ban on the lie would seem to.

Finally, in his chapter on politics, Meilaender seeks to lessen any this-worldly ability to distinguish between Augustine's famous City of God and City of Man. Rather than succumbing to the temptation to equate the City of God with the church and the City of Man with Rome, Meilaender contends that making moral judgments both about ourselves and about politics should be much more difficult. Augustine's two cities are eschatological realities, so our political and ecclesial fragmentations in this life

are unavoidable; we can only hope that our disagreements will be fruitful. Augustine's "flattening out" of history means that an Augustinian can present a more positive view of the prospects for political change in this life: if politics is not redemptive, it can at least be inched a bit more toward the good. Meilaender ends, improbably, by citing James Madison's Federalist Papers on the separation of powers and by criticizing Supreme Court justice Anthony Kennedy for arguing that each individual should get to define his or her own morality.

The chapters on grief, duty and politics ignore the central place of the incarnation and the church in Augustine's thought. This can perhaps be forgiven; generations of scholars have overlooked the prime place of Christ's body, head and members in such famous works as the *Confessions* and *The City of God*. If Augustine's *Expositions on the Psalms* were also on the regular reading list, his christological focus would be harder to miss, as scarcely a sentence goes by without his returning to the theme. Nevertheless, the primacy of Jesus is present in these other works, and it is simply overlooked in Meilaender's book.

For example, Meilaender misinterprets Augustine's "far country," in which he wasted his substance on "false and prostitute desires," as earthly creation, whereas *Confessions* IV.16 makes clear that the "far country," echoing the Prodigal Son story, is sin—which Christ came to undo. The very title of his book, *The Way That Leads There*, from *Confessions* VII, suggests for Meilaender a chastened sense of the limits of politics in this world. But for Augustine the phrase is clearly a christological reference: the Platonists could see the goal of the vision of God, but could not lead us there. Only Christ can.

It is odd to accuse a scholar normally taken to be conservative theologically and politically of inattention to Jesus. More attention to the christological center of Augustine's work would not make Augustinian interpretation easier—the tensions Meilaender explores always remain. But a more christological focus would have allowed Meilaender to give a clearer picture of Augustine in all his complexity. He might even have had something genuinely distinctive to say to Nussbaum and Justice Kennedy and Meilaender's fellow members of President Bush's Council on Bioethics, rather than merely offering his own wise counsel.