

Phillip J. Brown: *Friendship as Ecclesial Binding. A Reading of St. Augustine's Theology of Friendship in His In Iobannis evangelium tractatus*. Turnhout: Brepols 2022 (Studia Traditionis Theologiae 48). 201 p., 2 maps. € 65.00/\$ 85.00. ISBN: 978-2-503-59924-3.

A published version of the author's 2021 doctoral thesis completed at the University of Nottingham (U.K.), Phillip J. Brown's study of friendship offers a noteworthy contribution to recent studies on Augustine of Hippo's line-by-line commentary on the *Gospel of John*, precisely for the latter's importance in patristic ecclesiology and late antique reception of the classical tradition. As the title alone does not explicitly reveal, the author is also deeply concerned with the movement known in modern scholarship as Donatism – identified by Augustine as the *pars Donati* – and the theological issues it presents about the Church. In short, the author aims to link up Augustine's anti-Donatist, pro-Nicene ideal of friendship with the *Tractatus*. Brown alerts readers to his “ecclesial” re-reading of the ancient ideals of friendship in his introduction (pp. 17–37), where he points to contemporary efforts of historical theologians and Augustinian scholars to retrieve the bishop of Hippo's relationship to and dependence upon Nicene theology and religious polemic (i. e., “Pro-Nicene”, p. 28). Looking to Adam Ployd's 2015 Oxford University Press monograph<sup>1</sup> in particular, Brown finds both a robust textual interest in Augustine's comments on the *Fourth Gospel* beginning in 406–407, as well as theological concern for the Trinity in relation to the Church – thus moving quickly from a topical or thematic analysis of ancient friendship to the polemical underpinnings of Augustine's early episcopal career. It is for this reason that the intricacies of North African ecclesiology come front and center, as Brown navigates anti-Donatist invective within the *Tractatus* while pressing onward to his goal of clarifying Christian charity and human friendship as a Trinitarian, salvific exercise. This series of coincidental elements neatly folds into Brown's study, at times competing for the reader's attention as distinct yet inter-connected concerns. The author approaches his chosen topic thematically, introducing friendship first – albeit rather briefly – from the perspective of late Roman antiquity and Augustine's classical heritage, and then establishing friendship as “love's crowning glory” (p. 19) within a Trinitarian, ecclesial framework. In this way, the author approaches August-

1 A. Ployd: *Augustine, the Trinity and the Church. A Reading of the Anti-Donatist Sermons*. New York 2015 (Oxford Studies in Historical Theology).

tine's *In Iohannis evangelium tractatus* 1–124 indirectly, in order to solve a problem of theological and philosophical contextualization.

The work is divided into two “parts” (“Part I”, pp. 39–112; “Part II”, pp. 113–170), and the author’s main thesis and careful reading of selections from the *Tractatus* are found in chapters 4 and 5 of part II (“Figuration and Friendship. Rhetoric as the *Clavis* of Christian *Amicitia*”, pp. 115–143; “The *Amicus Sponsi*. John the Baptist and the Vision of Christian Friendship”, pp. 145–170). Perhaps somewhat surprisingly the author spends the first full chapter (“The Empire, Eagle and Africa. Donatism in the Context of Church and State”, pp. 41–63) revisiting the central claims and background of the Donatist controversy into which Augustine stepped as a priest (393) and, soon after, new bishop of Hippo (396). Readers less than familiar with this volume of North African religious history may welcome this orientation, insofar as social contexts and cultural identity alike figure prominently in the author’s argument to define friendship as a kind of spirituality and Christian witness. The purpose, of course, is to establish the social and theological contexts for ecclesial unity as a pressing pastoral problem in North Africa. A different approach might have been to start with a more prominent examination of Augustine’s Pauline and Trinitarian theology of the Church as *totus Christus*, which is also the end point to which in so many ways Brown takes us. Nonetheless, attending to friendship in what becomes a somewhat dogmatic fashion for the bishop of Hippo allows the author to demonstrate why Augustine’s conversion and subsequent polemical (and pastoral) encounter with Donatism shape his view of friendship as much as Cicero. Given the title, readers will patiently await until chapter 2 (“The Ties that Bind. Family, Friends and Friendship”, pp. 65–90, p. 65) Brown’s first mention of conf. 4.7 – where Augustine meditates so searchingly upon friendship, mortality, and metaphysics, landing upon a Pauline view of friends truly united by the “bond of the Holy Spirit” (cf. Rom. 5.5, the most quoted text of Paul in Brown’s study). What has substantially changed in the theological and rhetorical transposition from Cicero’s ideal of *consentio* through Augustine’s conversion to Pauline Christianity and longtime service in the African church? Ultimately, it seems the political dimension of Ciceronian friendship largely remains unscathed in Augustine’s formulation, with the caveat that the shared belief and ritual is now the faith of the Catholic Church. Following Ployd, so also for Brown the trinitarian nature of the Church (and, thus, ecclesial friendship) remains central to the polemical correctives of Donatist

opponents who have broken faith, as well as key to Augustine's positive appropriation of Cicero.

One remaining programmatic question, then, is simply why has the author chosen to focus upon the *Tractatus in Iobannis evangelium*? Written in years immediately following the Edict of Unity (405) and leading up to the decisive judgment rendered at the Conference of Carthage (411), which regularly appear as markers for the author, the earliest *Tractatus in Iobannis evangelium* 1–16 indeed have something to say in the early going about Donatism – although the remaining *Tractatus* 17–124 were composed or delivered in the 410s and 420s, when Donatism largely yielded in Augustine's mind to other concerns.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, speaking generally, Augustine's comments on the *Gospel of John* also at times draw upon a biblical text whose author emphasizes the teaching on friendship of Jesus: "I have called you friends" (John 15.15; cf. p. 130, citing from Cyprian's *De unitate*). In chapter 3 ("Quia Caritas Dei. Donatism, Friendship and the Unity of Christ", pp. 91–112), which integrates a corrective view of Donatism with Augustine's Christianization of classical friendship, Brown indicates, further, how the *Tractatus* provides "implicit emphasis upon the incarnation and love, particularly friendship, [where] Augustine displays for us a unique prism through which he displays his fully developed understanding of friendship as *ecclesial dwelling*" (p. 93). This prism, the "binding" of hearts and minds in the Holy Spirit, is the essence of religion for Augustine, and thus, Brown argues, also the essence of friendship – by which the faithful are held in the unity of the "whole Christ". The dissent and disunity of Donatist schismatics, therefore, does not allow for the spiritual communion of friendship based upon shared doctrine regarding the Church, sacramental unity, and the Holy Trinity.

The core of the author's argument makes its appearance in chapter 4, with its figurative reading of the Church and friendship in the *Gospel of John*, and especially in chapter 5, with its attention to John the Baptist as the *amicus sponsi*, "friend of the bridegroom". In a section titled "Figuration and the Hermeneutics of Friendship" (pp. 133–142), and drawing upon precedents

2 D. Milewski: Augustine's 124 Tractates on the Gospel of John: The Status Quaestionis and the State of Neglect. In: *AugStud* 33, 2002, pp. 61–77; A. D. Fitzgerald: Introduction. In: *Augustine: Homilies on the Gospel of John 1–40*. Translated by E. Hill. Ed. by A. D. Fitzgerald. Hyde Park, NY 2009 (*The Works of Saint Augustine. A Translation for the 21st Century: Pt. 3: Homilies 12*), pp. 13–36; id.: *Engaging the Gospel of John*. In: *AugStud* 48, 2017, pp. 3–22.

in Cyprian and Optatus, as well as the modern scholarship of Michael Cameron, for example, Brown explores several key examples of how Augustine applies “ecclesial rhetoric” (p. 143) to his reading of the biblical figures and tropes in typological fashion – notably those of the Holy Spirit as a dove, the unity of one’s garment, and the Samaritan woman in John 4 –, which together highlight the ecclesial and spiritual unity of Christian friends within the body of Christ. Here, the focus is upon highlights of the earliest tractates, especially in euang. Ioh. 2–3 and 15.

The most extensive comments, however, are reserved for John the Baptist in chapter 5, who most clearly demonstrates “what it means to be a friend of Christ, an *amicus sponsi* (Jn. 3:29b)” (p. 145) through his humility. Brown informs us that the very phrase “friend of the bridegroom” is “exhaustively utilized in [Augustine’s] polemic against the Donatists” (p. 150); for, “one can only be a friend of Christ if one has Christ [...]” (p. 151). Here, the textual discussion returns to in euang. Ioh. 2 with supporting evidence taken from Augustine’s *sermones ad populum* in order to demonstrate how John the Baptist illuminates the true nature of friendship with God (cf. John 1.7, p. 156); namely, by receiving the Word of God through an “illuminated minister” (p. 158) in simplicity, faith, and humility, made ready to live in peace and unity with the bride of the bridegroom (p. 170). In the end, Brown summarizes his findings with a conclusion (pp. 171–179) about Augustine’s transformation and adaptation of friendship as a political aim into a metaphysical bond, ultimately achieved by the Holy Spirit within the Church of Christ.

A few other points of technical criticism: the author evidently does not make use of Edmund Hill’s 2020 translation of the *Tractatus* 41–124,<sup>3</sup> lapsing instead into the 19th century Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers (NPNF) translation on a small number of occasions, perhaps bearing marks of further research the author intends to pursue. The real textual focus of the Brown’s study is in euang. Ioh. 1–16 in relation to other prominent works of Augustine, such as the *Confessions*, extensive *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, and the anti-Donatist polemical corpus. However, although it is somewhat commonplace scholarly convention to lump these sixteen tractates together for historical and rhetorical reasons (cf. Marie-François Berrouard’s 1969 edition of text,

3 Augustine: Homilies on the Gospel of John 41–124. Translated by E. Hill. Ed. by A. D. Fitzgerald. Hyde Park, NY 2020 (The Works of Saint Augustine. A Translation for the 21st Century. Pt. 3: Homilies 13).

translation and commentary from the “Bibliothèque augustinienne” of the Institut Catholique de Paris),<sup>4</sup> I personally find a compelling paucity of evidence of ‘Donatism’ or ‘Donatist theology’ in Augustine’s remarks on John’s Prologue (cf. in euang. Ioh. 1), where his meditations are not so burdened with a polemical focus. In any case, perhaps the title and introduction could have alerted readers that the entire scope of the *Tractatus* 1–124 would not form the basis for a complete textual commentary.

Second, in a noticeable way the scholarly works cited tend to privilege English-language authors exclusively, leaving at times prominent works seemingly absent. Notably, important works of the Belgian theologian Tarsicius Jan van Bavel OSA appear to be missing: for example, “Augustinus. Van liefde en vriendschap” (“Of Love and Friendship”) or “The Double Face of Love in Augustine”.<sup>5</sup> Referencing van Bavel’s entry (“Love”) in “Augustine through the Ages”, while eliding some of these other noteworthy studies suggests a degree of scholarly perfection to be desired, especially since the latter article cited above draws from the contemporaneous homilies of Augustine on the *First Letter of John* also examined by Ployd in his monograph. Unfortunately, beyond a rather small handful of references, the author does not integrate the in epist. Ioh. 1–10 despite good reason for doing so both textually and theologically.

Most significantly, in terms of thematic or conceptual focus, this reviewer was also somewhat surprised not to find greater exploration of the monastic tendencies in Augustine’s spirituality, theology, and practice of friendship. As an ideal, the ‘ecclesial’ dimension of friendship – rooted in an ancient precedent of agreement (*consentio*) or harmony, thus a political virtue, as well as a kind of metaphysical bond more in keeping with Plato – may seem at times rather amorphous and non-descript, without the kind of down-to-earth saltiness of actual human relationships in all their passion, grief, and occasions of forgiveness. In other words, what about the practice of friendship for Augustine, not just the spiritual (read: dogmatic) ideal? Might the epistolary

4 Augustin: Œuvres de Saint Augustin. 9e série: Traités sur saint Jean. Homélie sur l’Évangile de saint Jean I–XVI. Traduction, introduction et notes par M.-F. Berrouard. Paris 1969 (Bibliothèque augustinienne 71).

5 T. J. van Bavel OSA: Augustinus. Van liefde en vriendschap. Baarn 1970; id.: The Double Face of Love in Augustine. In: *AugStud* 17, 1986, pp. 169–181.

corpus, for example, form the basis for a more extensive integration of this theme?

Finally, minor errata of capitalization and punctuation – wandering commas, missed paragraph breaks, improper capitalization, both in main text and bibliography – while not grievous or overwhelmingly distracting, nevertheless may discourage readers. For example, one finds reference to a 2000 article by Lewis Ayres<sup>6</sup> in the *Journal of Early Christian Studies* as “Lewis (2000)” on p. 33, n. 54; “western north Africa” to begin a sentence on p. 42 or “Sherwin’s Article” on p. 148; an incorrect reference to n. 7, rather than n. 10, on p. 95, n. 15; citation in the bibliography of “The One Christ” by David Vincent Meconi SJ<sup>7</sup> as authored by “S.D. Meconi”, etc. Similarly, at times the discussion and translation of Latin texts becomes perplexing; for example, the author’s footnoted explanation of love as *amor* and *delectio* (p. 18, n. 5) too vaguely identifies both as verbs.

Overall, despite the compelling merits of this vision of friendship as an ecclesial communion and leaving aside these technical issues, in today’s social climate one wonders whether true friendship cannot allow greater dissonance of belief structures. Must true friends be so alike as to admit no differences, “agreement in all things human and divine” (p. 85)? Has Augustine really grown past his earlier phase of treating friendship within the “highly intolerant” (p. 83) framework of his youthful *libido dominandi*? Does not Augustine’s view of the pilgrim Church as a “mixed body” support a more flexible view of earthly friendships?

6 L. Ayres: “Remember That You Are Catholic” (*serm.* 52.2): Augustine on the Unity of the Triune God. In: *JECS* 8, 2000, pp. 39–82.

7 D. V. Meconi SJ: *The One Christ. St. Augustine’s Theology of Deification*. Washington, D.C. 2013.

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