

Francis X. Gumerlock, *Fulgentius of Ruspe on the Saving Will of God*. Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2009. Pp. vii + 220. \$109.95

Fulgentius lived from 468–533, serving as bishop of the North African coastal city of Ruspe for the last twenty-five years of his life. He was a staunch defender of orthodox Trinitarian orthodoxy. This resulted in his exile to the island of Sardinia by the Arian Vandal king, Thrasamund, at a time when North Africa was firmly under Arian and Vandal control. But Fulgentius persevered, not only in the area of Trinitarian theology, but also in his teaching on grace, free will and divine predestination, which were still areas of controversy in North Africa at the beginning of the sixth century. Francis Gumerlock offers his readers a glimpse into one of the more intriguing controversies of the early church in North Africa at this time. The church in North Africa during the early decades of the sixth century was still grappling with the implications of the previous century's controversy between Augustine and Pelagius. Much of this controversy centered on the interpretation of Paul's words to Timothy in the second chapter of his first epistle: "[God] wants all to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth."

Gumerlock notes how at the beginning of the Pelagian controversy, Augustine held to a universal saving will of God, the fulfillment of which was conditioned on human response. However, as Augustine became more focused on predestination in his debates with Pelagius and Julian of Eclanum, he restricted the extent of God's saving will. He maintained that the "all" of 1 Timothy 2:4 referred to "all of the predestined" rather than the more universal sense of "all," meaning "everyone" (1). Prosper of Aquitaine, a devotee of Augustine who defended his theology of grace after Augustine's death, developed his own theology in the opposite direction, restricting the saving will of God to the elect in his earlier writings, but later insisting that God's grace was truly universal and offered to all people, whether elect or not (1–2). The theological tension that exists is between the existence of divine grace on the one hand and human free will on the other (iii). In either case, divine grace necessarily intervenes in order for faith to exist and be active in the life of a believer. But does this divine grace negate the role of the human will? If we are saved by God's grace, in other words, what is the role of the human will? Even more to the point, what is the role of the divine will? If divine grace is necessary, and the divine will wants all to be saved, then why do not all receive it?

This is the heart of the question Gumerlock explores in the person of Fulgentius during his tenure as bishop of Ruspe nearly a century after Augustine's death. If, as 1 Timothy 2:4 states, "[God] wants all to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth," why then are there some who do not come to that knowledge? Is God's

will in some way limited? Either God wants all to be saved, or the “all” must be in some sense restricted only to those who are predestined for salvation. Both views can be found in Fulgentius, and thus scholars have been divided on the issue as to whether Fulgentius taught that the saving will of God is universal or that it is restricted to the elect. This debate is the subject of the first chapter.

Gumerlock proposes to resolve the scholarly debate in subsequent chapters by positing a development in Fulgentius, similar to that evidenced in Prosper and Augustine before him. He proposes that Fulgentius changed his opinions on the matter over the course of time as he takes us through a “chronological survey of the key texts of Fulgentius, noting a shift in Fulgentius’s thought from asserting the universality of God’s saving will in his early writings, to restricting that universality in his later writings” (2). The dating of these works becomes an important component of the study and is one of a number of valuable contributions Gumerlock makes to scholarship in setting forth a reasoned and logical progression in Fulgentius’s thought.

The earlier writings of Fulgentius, exemplified in his *Ad Monimum* (ca. 518), proclaim the universal saving will of God, i.e., that God wants all to be saved without qualification. But Fulgentius soon begins to limit his view of God’s saving will. Gumerlock identifies the catalyst for this change with Fulgentius’s encounter with the Semi-Pelagian work *De gratia* written by Faustus of Riez around 474 or 475. This work had found a renewed interest throughout the empire in the early decades of the sixth century due to Gennadius of Marseilles’ praise of Faustus and his treatise in *Liber de viris illustribus* (495). Faustus held that salvation is a matter both of God’s willingness and human willingness (75). When Fulgentius writes his *De remissione peccatorum* (ca. 518/519), Gumerlock convincingly demonstrates that he had Faustus’s *De gratia* in his possession. While in the majority of the work he holds to the universality of the saving will of God, Fulgentius narrows the saving will of God to the predestined in *De remissione peccatorum* 2.2. There he emphasizes the invincibility of a divine will that cannot be thwarted by any human will. Thus when Fulgentius interprets 2 Peter 3:9 he concludes that “God is not willing that any *of the predestined* perish,” preserving the sovereign saving will of God. The progression is even more pronounced as Gumerlock explores Fulgentius’s *Epistula 17* (A.D. 520) written a year later. Fulgentius, at the request of some Scythian monks, is reacting against the Semi-Pelagian theology prevalent in Constantinople. Fulgentius returns to the passage from 1 Timothy 2:4, noting that “God wills all *kinds of* persons to be saved.” Here, the “all” is qualified and limited to the various kinds of people God would save. Finally, a complete change in Fulgentius is reflected in his later writing, *De Veritate* (A.D. 523) where, in

essence, Fulgentius holds that “God *does not* will all to be saved,” nor is “the grace of God . . . given to all humans” (111). The classic literary device of synecdoche, a part for the whole, is what enables Fulgentius to take the *all* as representing only a part of humanity, the elect (121).

Gumerlock represents Fulgentius’s exegesis as endemic of the biblical exegesis of the North African patristic tradition. This tradition is embodied in Tyconius’s *Book of Rules* written some one hundred and fifty years before Fulgentius in North Africa, a tradition “of magnifying God’s attributes of sovereignty and omnipotence” (132). The implication is that by restricting the “all” to the elect, as Fulgentius does in his exegesis, God is able to follow through on his sovereign will of willing to save all the elect. Thus, in this later stage of Fulgentius’s exegesis, “the omnipotence and sovereignty of God is Fulgentius’s hermeneutical tool for determining the scope of God’s saving will” (114). The end result is that the extent of God’s saving will is reduced to only the elect. Gumerlock presents Fulgentius’s exegesis as authoritative in North Africa, going so far as to say that “although Fulgentius may not have held a title of pontiff or patriarch as ecclesiastical heads of the churches in Rome, Constantinople, Antioch, and Alexandria did, in the second decade of the sixth century Fulgentius was actually functioning as patriarch of the church in North Africa” (129–130). That North African voice was indeed a distinct and important one within the Church catholic.

It is clear after reviewing this work that Fulgentius’s understanding of the saving will of God moved from that of universal salvation offered to all, to a later restricted sense in which God’s saving will extends only to the elect. It is also clear that those involved in Augustinian studies will appreciate this addition to the scholarly debate over Augustine’s legacy in North Africa. In addition, Gumerlock provides additional translations of primary sources not previously available. These translations, found in his seventh and last chapter, provide valuable background and context for Fulgentius and the Semi-Pelagian controversy in making available to the reader primary sources for those works the author highlights in his study. Gumerlock translates from the Latin works by Isidore of Seville *On Illustrious Men*, 14; Fulgentius, *Fragments to Eugippius*; Faustus of Riez, *On Grace*, 1.18; John Maxentius, *Chapters and Booklets on the Faith*, 15–18; and Caesarius of Arles *On Grace*. The bibliography and source material in the back are also quite beneficial, as are the extensive footnotes provided throughout the work.

*Fulgentius of Ruspe: On the Saving Will of God* provides an inviting snapshot into the larger patristic discussion on God’s grace as well as an important window into North African exegesis. Gumerlock is to be commended for his well documented and thorough study that will resonate not only among scholars of patristic

exegesis, but also among Reformed scholars and all those interested in the debate over predestination and the role of the divine and human wills.

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