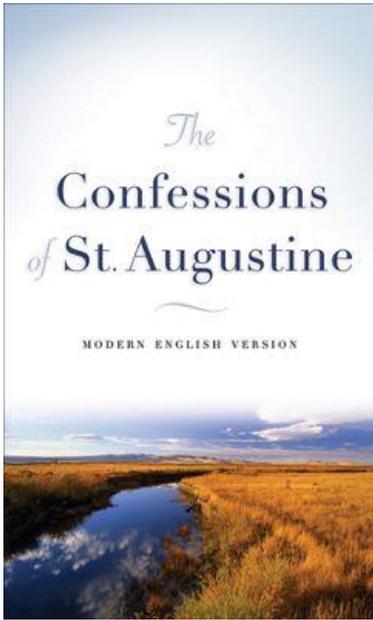


Pastor Stef's Book Review – Sept. 2015



Second to the Bible, the writings of Augustine have had more influence on both Catholics and Protestants than any other. Some have even suggested that, since Augustine, all theology is merely commentary on Augustine.

I just finished my third read of Augustine's *Confession (397-400)* and this time was probably my favorite. Part of that has to do with increased familiarity with this work, but a significant reason was because of the translation I used. Put out by *Spire* this abridged version does not read like a translation, but as a beautiful work of contemporary modern English (2005). I was quite curious as to who the translator is, but it is not disclosed anywhere.

Augustine's *Confessions* are considered the first in the genre of autobiography. What sets it apart from most, however, is that the whole work is written as a prayer. Augustine pours out his heart, asks questions and tells of his struggles with lust. He opens up about stealing pears as a youth, his mistress, his joining the Manichean cult and the influence Bishop Ambrose and the prayers of his mother Monica had on him eventually becoming a Christian at the age of 33. As an example of his style, here is Augustine prayerfully reflected back to the time he left home at 17 to study at Carthage (sounds like it could have been written today by someone heading off to university).

To Carthage I came. There I put my ear to the cauldron and heard from within and all around a song of unholy love. I did not love, but I loved the thought of love. I looked for something to love in my loving. The reason was that inside me there was a famine of inward food. I was starving for you, my God. This was not the sort of famine in which I realize my hunger. Indeed I lacked any longing for incorruptible sustenance, not because I had been filled with it, but because I was empty and loathed it. In misery my soul cast about, seeking sensual objects that could scratch where the pox itched. (p. 31-32).

Augustine's *Confessions* have taught me how to confess, reflect on life and pray. He has also taught me how to worship God by thinking and stretching my mind into mysteries until it hurts. One warning, Augustine's autobiography essentially ends with the death of his mother and he spends the last ¼ of the book reflecting on such things as timelessness, memory and on whether or not we even exist. Contemplations like the following abound:

The mind is too limited to contain even itself. And what is the part that the mind cannot contain? Is it outside the mind itself, rather than hidden within? If it is there, why can't I comprehend it? (p. 165).

If this is not for you just stop at the end of his story. But if you find continuously gnawing on theological mysteries worshipful, plow ahead. I've read it three times now (as well as commentary on it) and *I think* I'm starting to understand about 50% of it. Maybe next time through I'll chew out another 5%. If anything, Augustine protects us from creating a god in our own image. He reminds us that we are just scratching the surface of God's vastness. Wouldn't we all do better to wonder more and be less quick with simplistic answers?