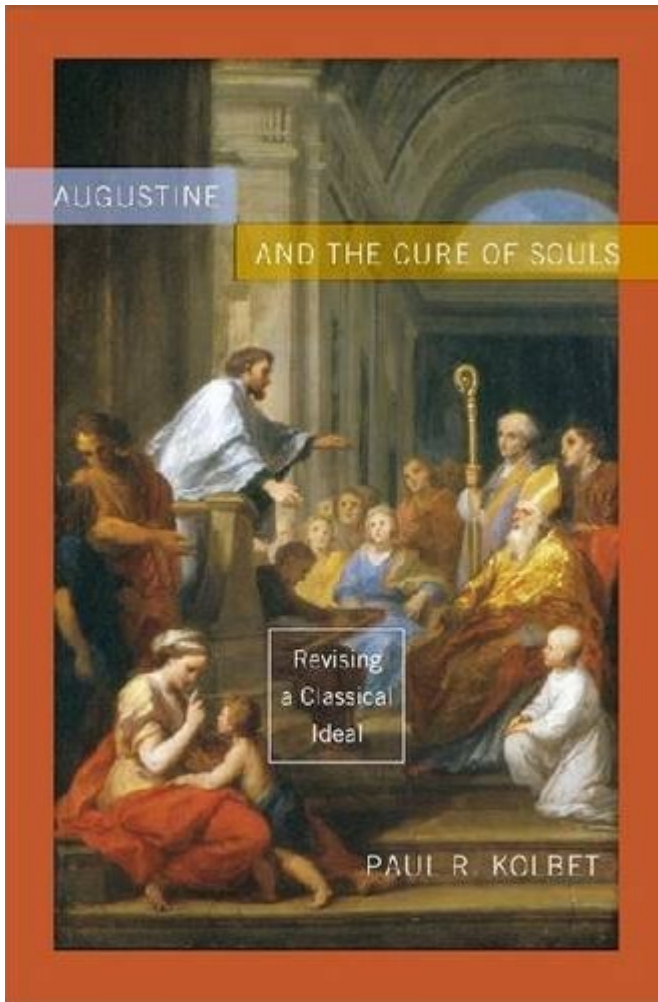


Augustine and the Cure of Souls: Revising a Classical Ideal

by [Jordan Hylden](#) in the [June 29, 2010](#) issue

## In Review



## Augustine and the Cure of Souls: Revising a Classical Ideal

Paul R. Kolbet  
U of Notre Dame P

Hegel once said that the modern world began when we exchanged morning prayer for the morning newspaper. Of course, most of us let our newspaper subscriptions expire long ago, and we get our information fix instead from Facebook feeds and

Twitter tweets, Fox News and the Daily Show, all delivered every second of every day by Coca-Cola, Miller Lite and McDonald's hamburgers. We live in a world filled to the brim with words, most of them trying to persuade us to buy or believe something, and all of them shaping us far more than we know. Any preacher knows the problem: the average American watches 28 hours of television a week, and if she goes to church, she hears Christ preached for 20 minutes. In a world like this, how does the gospel stand a chance?

Augustine of Hippo lived long before Facebook, and he spent much of his life thinking about how human beings are shaped by words, both divine and human. We tend to forget that Augustine was a professor of rhetoric before he was a bishop and that he spent much of his career preaching sermons rather than writing long treatises. In *Augustine and the Cure of Souls*, Paul R. Kolbet, professor of theology at Boston College, reminds us how deeply Augustine was shaped by the ancient world's rhetorical tradition and shows how he both drew upon it and upended it in his long career of preaching Christ.

As it turns out, Augustine the homilist thought long and hard about many of the same problems that still bedevil preachers today. He taught that in a world full of bewitching words, God has not left us to ourselves but seeks to entice us by a divine rhetoric: the Word of love incarnate and the scriptural and sacramental words that bear him witness. This rhetoric, Augustine held, offers to cure our souls in a way profoundly different from the rhetoric of the world. Instead of self-help, self-sufficiency and self-fulfillment, it offers us the only cure that lasts: complete dependence on God's grace and love.

To say that God entices us by divine rhetoric might sound troubling. Shouldn't God appeal to our reason? Rather than offering people persuasive sermons and beautiful music and liturgy, shouldn't the church sponsor lectures and write up position papers? Of course, we do offer that sort of thing, and so did Augustine. But like many of his pagan predecessors, such as Plato and Cicero, Augustine thought that logic wasn't usually enough to lead someone to the truth, for the simple reason that most of us are already held captive by beliefs that serve our self-interested purposes and are pretty sure that we've figure out what's what just fine on our own.

The classical world's answer to this dilemma, Kolbet says, was called *psychagogy*: the art of bringing people to see the errors that have captured them and persuading them bit by bit to exchange falsehood for truth, shadows for light. If this sounds like

the work of run-of-the-mill Sunday sermons, that is no accident. The ideal of a philosophical orator who cured souls with words was highly influential in ancient culture, and it was picked up by ancient Christians as well. Augustine, much like Plato and Cicero before him, thought that people needed to be shown not only that the truth is true, but also that it is good, beautiful and desirable.

But if Augustine the Roman took much of this tradition for granted, Augustine the Christian was to transform it in profound ways. He believed that human rhetoric was useful only insofar as it pointed to the divine rhetoric: the Word by which God has promised to lead us, through the Spirit in the church's reading of scripture, into all truth. Unlike his pagan forebears, Augustine always made a point of reminding those gathered to hear him preach that he was just as much a disciple as they were, seeking alongside them to be taught by the scriptures.

For Augustine, the long, arduous, communal process of searching the scriptures was a key part of how God draws us to himself. The scriptures were a kind of school in which we are taught to see and love things rightly: as we read and humbly struggle with the Bible, where everything is seen in the light of God, we learn to see ourselves and the world in the same light.

What we learn when we see ourselves in scripture, Augustine argued, is that we stand in need of God's grace for our salvation. Perhaps more than anywhere else, this is where Augustine departed from the classical tradition. The wise person, according to pagan philosophy, was one who had learned how to resist the barbarians of the soul, who had reasoned and willed one's way to virtue and self-sufficiency. As a young man, Augustine more or less agreed with this picture. But as Kolbet tells the story, when Augustine grew older he came to see its deep inadequacy. He realized that we are not possessed of the resources that Plato thought we had, which means that coming to see the good and the true is never enough. Instead, we need God himself to write his law upon our hearts.

Augustine concluded that virtue in this life is not perfection but, instead, forgiveness of sins and acceptance of our deep need for a Savior. The cure of souls is thus achieved not by us but by God—by the living and active Word who both teaches us and transforms us in the power of the Spirit.

Of course, Kolbet's Augustine leaves many pressing questions of today's preachers unanswered. How might we persuade people without manipulating them? And how

should we point to a divine rhetoric about which many people have grown suspicious? Because Kolbet's concern is historical, we should not expect his Augustine to answer all of our questions. But as Kolbet has shown, Augustine has much more to say to us today than we might think.

Augustine held that the best way to understand him was to observe his ministry in action, and by patiently doing so, Kolbet has done today's ministers a great service.