

Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary

Formal Critique: Augustine as Mentor

A Paper  
Submitted to Professor David L. Goza  
In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Course  
Church History I  
CHHI 520

By  
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## **Bibliographical Entry**

Smither, Edward L, Ph.D. *Augustine as Mentor*. Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2008.

## **Author Information**

Edward L. Smither, Ph.D., is a member of the staff of Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary in Lynchburg, VA where he serves as assistant professor of Church History and Intercultural Studies. He has a great love for teaching as he has taught in such places as France and North Africa in his lifetime. Dr. Smither has taught in Paris as well as held numerous church positions across the state of Virginia and currently serves as both an instructor at Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary and as an Adult Bible Community leader at Living Word Baptist Church in Forest, VA<sup>1</sup>

## **Content Summary**

In his book, *Augustine as Mentor*, Dr. Edward Smither takes an in-depth look at the unique relationship of mentor and disciple from Jesus and his disciples all the way to the mentoring style of the fourth century North African church under the famous theologian, Augustine of Hippo. Over the course of the five chapters and epilogue, readers can watch as church mentors of the early church build relationships with their disciples based on eight principles: The Group, The Mentor as Disciple, Selection, The Mentor-Disciple Relationship, Sound Teaching, Modeling and Involving in Ministry, Releasing to Ministry, and Resourcing Leaders (Smither 2008, 13-23). Around these bulwarks, the author paints a vivid picture of the power of this method in creating positive disciples who would, in turn, disciple others. Furthermore, Smither shares the way that this system can serve modern ministers and their disciples.

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<sup>1</sup> Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary, "Biography of Dr. Edward Smither.2009." Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary, <http://www.liberty.edu/academics/religion/seminary/index.cfm?PID=15619> (accessed September 30, 2009).

As Smither begins his work, he builds a Biblical foundation for the mentoring way of life using the ministry of Jesus and his teachings to his disciples as the framework. After this is established, Smither compounds upon the biblical sources of the emerging mentor-disciple relationship by referencing the apostles' work such as Paul's address to the Corinthians showing his love for the comradeship of Titus (Smither 2008, 19), Augustine's *Sermon 340* (Smither 2008, 16) and countless others to prove the ultimate point that mentorship is both biblical and historically common.

Moving into a larger collection of information, Smither leads his readers into a virtual *Who's Who* among early church leaders and their students and shows how each of these relationships created the historical fabric of the time-honored tradition of mentoring. Since the time of the New Testament's writing has passed, the author uses many other documents of the Christian Church such as countless letters among bishops, presbyters, and Augustine's communications as an illustration of the rise and (occasionally) fall of early clergy from Carthage to Rome to Constantinople and back. Readers are introduced to several people of notoriety from the early centuries of the church including Cyprian, Pachomius, Basil of Caesarea, Ambrose of Milan, and eventually many contemporaries of Augustine himself (Smither 2008, 90). With each of these famous names, Smither uses their communications to show how they each engaged in the eight principles of mentoring with special attention to how they were different but moreover how they shared in the unified structure as Jesus created.

Drawing ever closer to the namesake of his manuscript, Smither paints a detailed picture of the many figures that directly impacted Augustine using the clever analogy of a mosaic (Smither 2008, 92 & 124) to typify how the distinctly different people each painted a piece of the legendary theologian's life.

Starting with Augustine's mother Monica, Smither expands the perspective of those impacting the bishop's life to his friends Alypius, Nebridius, Evodius as well as his teachers Ambrose of Milan, Simplicianus, and Valerius, in a style that can best be likened as a zoom lens that slowly expands its focal point until the reader has a clear picture of those that made Augustine the man he became. As can be expected, Smither draws much of his information from Augustine's own autobiography *Confessions* but manages to take a less linear course by including trusted documents of historical merit such as Possidius's (Smither 2008, 118) *Life of Augustine* and countless letters from Augustine and his contemporaries that illustrate the principles of mentoring.

It is not until the fourth chapter that Smither finally connects the body of his work to focus on the actual mentoring styles of Augustine himself and could be perceived by the reader as the actual namesake chapter. By drawing upon many sources including Augustine's *Confessions*, many letters from Augustine to his church and from others to Augustine as well as many works of Pellegrino and some more modern works, Smither shows the rise of Augustine from a layperson to a presbyter, and finally to Bishop of Hippo (Smither 2008, 127-128). In the early part of this chapter, the reader is introduced to Augustine as he was viewed through a number of lenses including how he preached, how he judged, how he disciplined his disciples to show the kind of leader he became. Once the rise is complete, the author adds another layer of reality to Augustine as he drew upon the many works of his forefathers and contemporaries as he mentored the promising monks in the many monasteries in how to step out from their monastic life to join the clergy. When the leaders were brought alongside Augustine, he continued to build on the same eight principles before releasing them to either his own church or to a church that needed them.

In the final numbered chapter, the eight principles around which the now classical mentor-disciple relationship was built are aligned with the various ways in which Augustine's teachings and his lifestyle exemplified them. Through excerpts from Augustine's apologetic documents including his stand against Pelagius, his letters to other churches and the Pope, as well as reflective works including the previously mentioned *Life of Augustine* by Pellegrino, the reader can piece together the expectations of the bishop as well as the many challenges and successes he faced as he forged a legacy that will never be forgotten. Dr. Smither takes to heart the manner in which Augustine embraced, taught and used the mentor-disciple relationship and the reader can see that the whole purpose of the work thus far was to define a model that Augustine perfected in his years.

As the historical and educational document nears completion Smither takes the time to connect the model set forth in the book with the modern church. The author cautions the reader of the seeming decline of the personal and lifelong relationships of mental and spiritual depth of said relationships among the church today (Smither 2008, 258) as it is interspersed with a life that often moves faster than the person it belongs to. Smither calls upon the church to not only grow their members to help with the church but to raise up the best leaders with intent to release them to serve in a world in desperate need.

### **Evaluation**

A profound love of historical figures of the early church abound in Dr. Smither's book *Augustine as Mentor* as he creates a framework devised by careful analysis of the plethora of leaders and teachers within the early church and synchronizing their successes and failures with a model that illustrates the biblical view of mentors.

By first taking examples from the scriptures showing how the budding Christian church found, built and sent out leaders from Jesus' selection of his disciples to the extensive training Paul offered his comrades, the author forms a scripturally sound concept of how the Bible illustrates the tenets for leaders. Compounding this with endless repetitions of the same concepts throughout the early church, the reader is able to discern that not only did the church develop leaders around these historical and theological elements but trained others to repeat the process. It is evident in Smither's style that this is a theme he was able to see long before he wrote the book.

As the majority of evangelical churches strive to emulate the early church, it is no wonder that its followers would strive to find every possible thing that is scripturally proven and was used throughout history. Upon these two congruencies, the author does a wonderful job of building out a connection and using factual historical documents and the inerrant word of God to support the concept of mentors and their disciples. As Jesus consistently told his followers to do as he did, there is no doubt his followers would find the style he used and replicate it in their disciples and thanks to the work of Dr. Smither, current and future generations can learn this method and carry it over to their lives.

Stylistically speaking, the reader will find that Smither uses a clean mixture of historical evidence and scriptural knowledge that not only create a believable thesis but also to historically prove it over and over throughout almost four centuries of church history the work covers. It is apparent to the reader that Smither's eight principles of mentoring are based primarily on firm scriptural evidence from the life of Jesus, the greatest mentor of all time that stand true with the Biblical mentor. If that is not sufficient to support the author's point of view, the fact that history affords repeatable proof of their validity will take care of the rest.

With each great historical leader that is sampled, the reader quickly finds themselves fitting their works into the frame as devised by Smither.

The strength of the book, however, does also double as a weakness in some areas. After the first few chapters of Smither's work, the style becomes repetitive and begins to lose steam. It is important that the reader is able to see the consistency in which the events are repeated and to what degree but the manner in which Smither delivers this can sometimes be dull and counterintuitive. This is not to say that the author does not prove valid points - that the readers can be sure of - but one might find they wish that the information was delivered more imaginatively. This particular component is made most apparent during the sixty-seven pages of the second chapter where a reader might begin to question who the book is really about.

Further adding to the repetitive feel of the book is the sheer volume of information the reader must analyze in the chapters. Most common books published in the market today have approximately thirty-five pages in each chapter but the largest chapter of Smither's book, chapter four, spans over eighty-eight pages and the second largest chapter, chapter two, spans over sixty. It is within this instance that the author's love of history, while passionate, is a bit much for the standard reader. If one seeks an informative read that they can take in over a weekend or two this book will soon feel more like a marathon race.

In contrast to the length of information presented to the reader, it becomes apparent that Smither's work is nothing if not thorough. All of the information presented is backed by a lifetime pursuit of historical knowledge that is the primary focus of the author's years of historical research and teaching experience. The author is able to accurately use the corpus of Christian history to reveal and to breathe life into piles of parchment that the layperson may never even knew existed yet the church fathers gave countless lives to protect.

A student of history will see many practical references to the Augustinian letters, the collected works of church scholars and many famous works of the famous theologian himself in a new light.

Yet speaking of Augustine and his works as they relate to the book, Smither's skill is in chronological organization of data rather than intuitive organization of data and the book is a testament to this. Considering that it takes the author over half of the book to even begin to discuss Augustine and his teachings, the reader might find themselves wondering if the book has anything to do with Augustine at all. The trepidation that this organizational style creates will easily dissipate, however, once the reader reaches the chapters over Augustine as Smither's writing style reveals that his plan all along was to give a very concrete picture of the world around the book's namesake and to show the bishop's fulfillment of that picture. Much like the Old Testament spends several thousands of pages to describe the world and the need for the Messiah, the considerable brevity of Jesus' ministry could lead a non-believer to wonder what the Bible actually teaches about him until they find that the remainder of the New Testament focuses on the reasons and the fulfillment of that ministry.

The need for the church to raise leaders within its walls is one that has always been and likely always will be until Christ returns. Yet, despite the need for these things, many churches have tried to create a teaching environment using curriculum like schools or in having a minister essentially re-teach classes he was taught in seminary and the fruits have not been quite what the church had hoped.



If a spiritual leader reads the information presented within Smither's book, the biblical and logical framework will not only aid in raising new leaders in the church but also aid in enhancing the relationships that the leader has with his congregation and his administration by developing the communal sense of passion for God and love of learning as outlined in the very Bible itself and as implemented repeatedly throughout the history of the church.

To that end, the information provided by Smither in *Augustine as Mentor* serves the purpose of equipping church leaders with the same tools that caused the success of the church in its infancy and turbulent adolescence all the way up to the life of one of its most influential scholars, Augustine of Hippo. Just as the Jewish forefathers taught their children not only their trade but also their knowledge and expected the knowledge to be retained throughout life and passed to the next generation, so should the sound guidance of spiritual leaders both past and present. The Heavenly Father has given His people the inerrant word of His mouth and expects that it will be delivered from one generation to the next it seems only logical that the way the Bible teaches leaders should be likewise repeated.

## **Bibliography**

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Smither, Dr. Edward L. *Augustine as Mentor*. Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2008.