

Augustine of Hippo (354 – 430 AD)

I. Introduction

There is no more influential theologian for both the Catholic and Protestant traditions than St. Augustine of Hippo. His preaching was prolific, his writing was epic making, and his influence is timeless. It is a life-long endeavor to wade through all of his writings and few have done it. Although he had somewhat humble beginnings, it is clear that he was being prepared early in life for his ministry as a teacher and shepherd of the church.

II. Beginnings

The man we know as Augustine was born Aurelius Augustine on November 13, 354 in modern day Algeria.¹ His upbringing was generally Christian as his mother tried to raise him in the traditions of the African church.² He admitted readily that his family cared little for his morality as long as he excelled in his studies. His father and family endured many sacrifices to assure that he would get a premier classical education, since it was really the only way he would be able to achieve success. He was educated in his hometown of Thagaste until he was 15. After taking a year off for his father to save up, he was sent to finish his schooling at Carthage. He was trained as a rhetorician and fell in love with the classics. He quickly lost interest in studying Greek, so he mostly read the Latin classics. One particular book of influence was *The Hortensius* by Cicero.³ It was this book that steered him towards a path of pursuing truth, or what he called “Wisdom”. At Carthage, he took a concubine, who stayed with him for 15 years and bore him a child, Adeodatus.⁴ After he finished his education at age 19, he became a schoolmaster for the next 11 years of his life in Carthage, Rome, and Milan.



III. Emergence

For about 9 years after he finished school, Augustine was an adherent to the dualistic philosophy of Manichaeism.⁵ This was the “wisdom” he thought he was looking for and

¹ Warfield, B.B. *Calvin and Augustine* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1956), p.305

² Before he went off to Carthage, his mother told him “not to commit fornication and above all not to seduce any man’s wife” (*Confessions of St. Augustine*, 2.3.7).

³ “This book, indeed, changed all my way of feeling. It changed my prayers to Thee, O Lord; it gave me entirely different plans and aspirations. Suddenly, all empty hope for my career lost its appeal: and I was left with an unbelievable fire in my heart, desiring the deathless qualities of Wisdom, and I make a start to rise up and return to Thee...I was on fire, my God, on fire to fly away from earthly things to thee” (*Confessions*, 3.4.7).

⁴ This concubine was never named in either his own writings or those of his contemporaries.

⁵ Named after its founder, Mani or Manichaeus (c.217–277), known as the Apostle of Light, a Persian religious teacher. Its central doctrines were dualistic, positing human life (and the world in general) as a battle between the

he brought this with him to Thagaste in 375. He and his friends were significant propagators of this philosophy, even though it was considered heretical by the African Catholic Church. Overall, he followed his career path, which took him from Carthage to Rome in 383. Then the following year, he was appointed Professor of Rhetoric in Milan. At Milan, he discovered the Neo-Platonists,⁶ following the writing of Plotinus, which caused him to shed his Manichaeism. Also in Milan, Augustine met Ambrose, the city's bishop. It was under the preaching of Ambrose that he attributes his conversion.⁷ However, this did not come quickly. Augustine's mother, Monica, came to Milan in 385. She was arranging a marriage for him, but he still had his concubine. So he was faced with decision to let her go, which he agonized over. He decided to let her go, but he was devastated. So much so, in fact, that he took another concubine rather quickly, out of wedlock. It was his lust that he found insurmountable to overcome until 386. He recalled that he finally began to see the beauty of the purity of Christ:

It was, in fact, my old mistresses, trifles of trifles and vanities of vanities, who still enthralled me. They tugged at my fleshly garments and softly whispered: "Are you going to part with us? And from that moment will we never be with you anymore? And from that moment will not this and that be forbidden you forever?"...But now it said this very faintly; for in the direction I had set my face, and yet toward which I still trembled to go, the chaste dignity of continence appeared to me--cheerful but not wanton, modestly alluring me to come and doubt nothing, extending her holy hands, full of a multitude of good examples--to receive and embrace me.
(*Confessions*, 8.11.27)

He was baptized by Ambrose in 387. Two trials he faced almost immediately were the deaths of both his mother in 387 and his son in 389.

IV. Ministerial Ambitions

One of the first things Augustine wanted to do upon his discovery of grace of God was to establish a monastery. He had retired from his teaching and resided in Cassiciacum, as well as in Rome, before he formulated a monastic community for himself and his friends in Africa. After his son's death, he thought it might be better if he moved the community to Hippo. They already had a bishop there, so he was less likely to be asked to step into that role.⁸ However, in 391 he was all but forced to become the bishop of

forces of good and evil, light and darkness, truth and error (the two seen as being completely separate in nature and origin), but Mani added the notion that matter is evil, and also advocated celibacy and an ascetic life in general. Manichaeism accepted the notions of life after death in either heaven or hell and of individual judgment.

⁶ This is a religious philosophy which teaches that there is a single source ("The One") of the universe which is outside of the physical and spiritual world and cannot be known through logic or reason. It teaches that we must trace our steps back to this source through increasing virtues and asceticism.

⁷ "And to Milan I came, to Ambrose the bishop, famed through the whole world as one of the best of men, thy devoted servant. His eloquent discourse in those times abundantly provided thy people with the flour of thy wheat, the gladness of thy oil, and the sober intoxication of thy wine. To him I was led by thee without my knowledge, that by him I might be led to thee in full knowledge" (*Confessions*, 5.13.23).

⁸ John Piper, *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy: God's Triumphant Grace in the Lives of Augustine, Luther, and Calvin* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000), p.54.

Hippo. He ministered there till his death in 430. He did continue his monastery there where he trained up a generation of priests that were commissioned all over Africa, and helped bring a replenishing to many churches. “He saw himself as part of the monastery, following the strict vegetarian diet and poverty and chastity...He never married. When he died there was no will because all his possessions belonged to the common order.”⁹

V. The Confessions

Among Augustine’s writings, there is no more popular than his *Confessions*. He wrote them when he was 43, and it serves as his spiritual autobiography up till that point in his life. Augustine gives his own introduction to his work:

“My *Confessions*, in thirteen books, praise the righteous and good God as they speak either of my evil or good, and they are meant to excite men's minds and affections toward him. At least as far as I am concerned, this is what they did for me when they were being written and they still do this when read. What some people think of them is their own affair; but I do know that they have given pleasure to many of my brethren and still do so.”

It combines journaling, prayer, and reflective analysis. The first 10 books cover his childhood, including his candid assessment of his lusts and rebellion. The last 3 books deal with his allegorical approach to the Genesis creation account. Peter Brown suggests that his context of fellowship and dialog with the men around him was conducive to this kind of biography or autobiography, “Augustine, therefore, already found himself with an audience used to intimate biography, and so, ripe for autobiography. The stories that circulated about people concerning events of their inner life...”¹⁰ The *Confessions* is a classic work that is still instrumental in the shaping of modern day devotional life and spirituality.

VI. The City of God

The best known of Augustine’s philosophical writings is his *City of God Against the Pagans*, in which he explains theology of history. The work began shortly after the sacking of Rome by Alaric and the Goths in 410. Some were claiming that the church was to be blamed since many had been turning to Christianity causing them to leave the worship of the Roman gods, angering them to allow Rome to be overrun. He begins in this work by dismantling this false thinking, pointing out conquests of Rome long before the advent of Christ. He then goes on to offer a comprehensive interpretation of history, as well as contemporary events. There is much influence in this work by Cicero, with quotes and allusions throughout.¹¹ The *City of God* is a seminal work of integration of both biblical and classical literature, which caused Augustine to juxtapose biblical

⁹ Piper, *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy*, p.55

¹⁰ *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (sec. ed; Berkeley: University of California, 2000), p.152

¹¹ *ibid*, p.300

answers with pagan answers, accentuating the solutions of the “new Christian literature”.¹²

VII. Pelagian Controversy

Augustine will forever be remembered by his understanding of the sovereignty of God over the human will. It is interesting to note that in an early treatise he wrote, *On the Freedom of the Will* (391), he would endorse the very view he would come to vehemently oppose. Pelagius was a British monk who came to Rome around the same time Augustine first arrived there. Just as Augustine was steeped into the Donatist controversy, Pelagius was coming to prominence in Rome among the laity in their chief time of influence. Pelagius was provoked to debate when he read the *Confessions*. It was phrases like, “Command what You will: give what You command” that enraged Pelagius. Although Augustine had settled his understanding that sovereign grace prevails over human freedom, it was not till the end of his life that he devoted the bulk of his time and energy to the controversy. It was a long and drawn out encounter because it affected people close to Augustine and he actually enjoyed studying grace. Augustine’s work was extremely effective, gaining him international notoriety, and resulting in Pelagianism being condemned as a heresy by the Church. It is this debate that arose later in the 1500’s that sparked much of the Reformation flame. R.C. Sproul comments on Augustine’s connection to the Reformation:

“It is Augustine who gave us the Reformation.” So wrote B. B. Warfield in his assessment of the influence of Augustine on church history. It is not only that Luther was an Augustinian monk, or that Calvin quoted Augustine more than any other theologian that provoked Warfield’s remark. Rather, it was that the Reformation witnessed the ultimate triumph of Augustine’s doctrine of grace over the legacy of the Pelagian view of man.”¹³

It is hard reconcile much of Augustine’s doctrine of the church with his doctrine of grace, considering his views of baptism and the sacraments. Perhaps it is as John Piper said in his address to the Bethlehem Conference for Pastors on the topic of Augustine in 1998: “The Reformation is Augustine’s doctrine of grace triumphing over his doctrine of the church.”

VIII. Sources

Augustine. *The Confessions of St. Augustine*. trans. by Rex Warner. New York: Mentor, 1963

Brown, Peter. *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*. Second Edition. Berkeley: University of California, 2000

¹² “After twenty years of study, Augustine was convinced that the Christians also had a literature of inexhaustible richness. ‘Your’ Vergil is now deliberately juxtaposed, at every turn, with ‘Our’ Scriptures” (ibid, p.305).

¹³ *Willing to Believe: The Controversy Over Free Will* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), p.13

Piper, John. *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy: God's Triumphant Grace in the Lives of Augustine, Luther, and Calvin*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2000

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IX. Timeline

354 St. Augustine is born at Thagaste, on November 13th.

365 Goes to school in Madaura.

370 Returns to Thagaste from Madaura.

371-372 Goes to Carthage for the first time to study rhetoric. Takes a concubine.

373 Reads Cicero's Hortensius and it made a decisive impact on his life, leading him to burst in love with philosophy, the love of wisdom. Falls into the Manichean error. His son Adeodatus is born. His father dies.

375 Returns from Carthage to Thagaste to teach rhetoric.

376 Death of an unnamed friend who was baptized. Returns to Carthage and begins teaching rhetoric.

380 Writes De Pulchro et Apto (lost work).

383 Sails to Rome with concubine and son.

384-385 Appointed professor of rhetoric in Milan. St. Monica arrives in Milan. St. Augustine is influenced by St. Ambrose and captivated by his preaching. He becomes a regular attendant at his preachings.

386 St. Augustine was converted in a garden in Milan on September. Retreats with St. Monica, Adeodatus and his friends to Cassiciacum, to devote himself to what was now for him the true philosophy, Christianity.

387-388 Returns to Milan, he and his son are baptized by St. Ambrose. At Ostia, he and St. Monica have a vision while looking through a window. St. Monica dies there. Goes to Rome.

390 Returns to Carthage, then Thagaste; his son dies.

391 Despite the fact that he did not intend to become a priest, when he was summoned to Hippo, while he was praying at a church the people gathered about and cheered him, begging Bishop Valerius to ordain him and so he was ordained a priest in Hippo, North Africa.

392 Writes to St. Jerome requesting Latin translations of Bible commentaries. Debates in Hippo with Fortunatus the Manichee.

393 Assists the plenary Council of Africa and at the request of the bishops, delivers a discourse which later became one of his works: On Faith and the Creed.

396 At age 42 becomes Bishop of Hippo, replacing Valerius, the then Bishop of Hippo and remains bishop until his death.

397 Writes work against the Epistle of Mani, Called the Fundamental.

401 Completes the highly influential story of his own conversion, his Confessions. Writes work against Faustus, the Manichean.

403 The Donatist controversy.

410 For health reasons, spends winter at villa outside Hippo.

411 Attends a conference at Carthage on June 11 to debate against the Donatist and successfully overthrows their doctrine and establishes the Catholic teaching.

412 Pelagian controversy. Pelagianism condemned at a council held at Carthage for their attacks against the doctrine of Original Sin.

417-18 Pope Innocent I ratifies the decisions of the councils of Carthage and Mileve against the Pelagians. St. Augustine informs Pope Zosimus about the true nature of Pelagianism and this leads him to condemn Pelagianism like his predecessor.

420 Completes his work On the Trinity, his dogmatic work on the Trinitarian mystery in the life of grace.

421 Writes the Enchiridion of Faith, Hope and Love.

426 Completes his monumental work: The City of God. Setting forth the Christian understanding of universal history and human destiny. [augustinevisionofjerome](#)

427 After Pelagianism a new doctrine emerges: semi-pelagianism. When informed about this doctrine by St. Prosper of Aquitaine, St. Augustine writes his two books On The Predestination of The Saints to refute their errors.

428 Writes his Retractions or Reconsiderations. Contrary to popular belief, this work did not mean that St. Augustine retracted his views. The work is an overview of all his works, where he gives the background and reason of composition for each and where he reviews them and points out some things he felt could have been said better and others which he regrets saying. Yet, to anyone who has read the Retractions, it becomes evident that the points he raises there are quite minimal.

430 St. Augustine dies at Hippo in August 28th during the Vandal's siege of Hippo when he was 76 years old.

