

Learning from the Church Fathers Augustine (354-430)

Aurelius Augustine, known to us simply as Augustine, is the most famous of all the Church Fathers, and one of the greatest theologians of the Western Church. The Reformers were strongly influenced by him. The great confessions and catechisms of the Reformed traditions, for example, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Westminster Confessions, and the Augsburg Confessions clearly reveal Augustine's influence. Dr. Abraham Kuyper told his Free University students that it is impossible to study all the church fathers. He advised them to limit themselves to one church father, preferably Augustine.

Augustine's greatest writings rank with the timeless literature of the ages. His reputation continues today as one of the most influential Christian thinkers of all time. He also has been a spiritual guide for multitudes through the ages. He lived and worked in an age much like ours. The Roman empire was collapsing. Barbarians were at a rampage. The Church went through turbulent times. It was confronted by heresy, and suffered from persecution. I am not surprised, therefore, that Augustine is receiving a more careful hearing not only in theology, philosophy, political theory, but also in the history of ideas. He gives answers to some of the most pressing questions facing our world today.

Augustine's Background

Augustine was born in 354 in Tagaste, a small town in north Africa. His father, Patricius, was a man of modest means who had to scrape together enough money to send Augustine to school. For most of his life Patricius was not a Christian. He seemed mostly untroubled by moral questions. But through the witness and example of his wife, Monica, a devout Christian, he became a Christian shortly before his death. He died when Augustine was seventeen years old.

Augustine's mother appears to have played a large role in his eventual conversion by her godly example and earnest prayers. Monica was loyal, earnest, and loving. But she was also possessive and demanding of her son. Augustine excelled at school in every subject except Greek. This fact would have ramifications later in his life. He grew up speaking Latin, the language in which he received all his formal education. Despite this failing, Augustine's parents decided to send their son to the great city of Carthage to complete his education. His advanced studies were made possible with the financial aid of a wealthy benefactor. He was sent to the large African city of Carthage, for advanced studies in rhetoric. He was to prepare for a career in law or government. Except for one year at home teaching grammar, he studied and taught in Carthage from 370 to 383. He became an accomplished scholar in what we would call today the speech and communication arts.

In his youth Augustine did not want to have anything to do with Christ. He was not interested in seeking forgiveness of sin and the obtaining of grace. Instead, he became an eclectic sampler of various schools of philosophy, religion, and morality. But he could not find rest for his soul. So he embarked on his first real attempt to satisfy his spiritual restlessness in his soul: through sex. Monica had warned him to avoid fornication and especially adultery, but he ignored her and rushed headlong into sexual sin, not only from lust, but also to boast of his exploits (real or imagined) to his friends. He set up house with a nameless mistress and lived

with her for the next fourteen years. At the age of eighteen, he became a father of a son, called Adeodatus, "given by God." He loved and admired his son, thinking him more clever than himself. After some years of studying in various centers, Monica and a few friends persuaded Augustine to go to Milan to study with the great Ambrose. And it was while in Milan, in 386, and in the company of a friend, Alypius, that Augustine experienced his moving conversion.

Augustine's Conversion

In Milan, Augustine found rest for his soul. He became attracted to the Christian faith by the powerful preaching of the famous Bishop Ambrose of Milan, a champion of the Nicene faith against the Arians. He became troubled by his sinful way of life. His emotional and spiritual turmoil eventually brought him to a crisis point. As he put it, "I was twisting and turning in my chain until it would break completely." He had been agonizing, as had the apostle Paul, about the power of sin and the failure of his will, "I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do...Wretched man that I am!" (Rom. 7:9,24). The focal point of his spiritual crisis came in a garden in the summer of 386. As he was sitting in his garden torturing himself with guilt and longing, tearing his hair and weeping bitterly, he suddenly heard a child's voice from the garden, saying over and over again, Tolle, lege (Take up and read). It was part of some kind of a game but in his emotional state, Augustine took it as a divine command:

"I hurried back to where my friend Alypius was sitting, where I had put down the book of the Apostle. I seized it, opened it, and silently read the first passage I saw: 'Not in riots and drunken parties, not in eroticism and indecencies, not in strife and rivalry, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh in its lusts.' I neither wished nor needed to read any more. At once, as I read the last words of the passage, it was as if a light of relief from all anxiety flooded into my heart. All the shadows of doubt were dispelled."

What the combined efforts of his mother and bishop Ambrose could not do, this passage from Paul's letter to the Romans (13:13,14) did. Augustine broke down and committed himself to Christ. His first act as a new Christian was to go and tell his mother. His character changed. He accepted Christianity with all its consequences. His egoism became love for others; his pride - Christian humility. He dedicated his enormous intellectual abilities to the defense and propagation of the Christian faith, writing in a style which was both passionate and intelligent, appealing to both heart and mind. On Easter Eve, 387, he and his son were baptized by Ambrose. Adeodatus died at seventeen, his father's grief tempered by confidence that two years earlier his beloved son had been baptized beside his father.

Augustine: Bishop of Hippo

In 391, the recent convert Augustine went to Hippo, a seacoast town not far from Tagaste. In 395, he became the bishop of Hippo Regius and served in that role to the end of his life. He built up his diocese, became involved in numerous religious controversies (against Donatists, Pelagians, and Arians), participated actively in yearly councils of the African bishops, and traveled back and forth across north Africa in zealous defense of the faith.

Confessions

One of Augustine's first works after becoming a bishop was the famous *Confessions*, one of the world's great devotional classics, and profound works of literature of all time. But what did Augustine mean by "confessions"? For Augustine it is more than a confession of sins. It is also a "testimony", the act of witnessing to the unfathomable greatness of God's grace in the midst of human sin. It is revealing a private life publicly so that people may hear. Augustine says to God, "For behold You love the truth, and that he that does the truth comes to the light. I wish to do it in confession, in my heart before You, in my writing before many witnesses." In other words, Augustine did not write as a professional philosopher or as an academic communicating his conclusions to other academics. The bulk of the book, one of the first autobiographies ever written, tells the story of his life until the death of his mother, all in the form of a prayer to God, interspersed with spiritual and doctrinal musings and teachings, frequently modeled on the Psalms. In the first paragraph, Augustine says, in much-quoted words, "You have made us for your own, and our hearts are restless until it rests in you."

Augustine: Minister of the Word

Augustine was a master of classical oratory, and a great expository preacher. Through his sermons he admonished, encouraged, and taught doctrine. A stenographer recorded his sermons, and if something unusual happened in the course of a sermon, the stenographer would make note of it. For instance, when Augustine spoke to his people of the terrible wrath of God, they would cry out in terror.

Augustine left a rich legacy of sermons. We have a long series on the Sermon on the Mount and 124 sermons on the Gospel of John. His commentary on 1 John is really a course of sermons preached to the newly baptized just after Easter in the year 413. His lengthy commentary on the Psalms is compiled from his sermons over a period of several years. Besides these longer series of sermons we have a collection of perhaps three hundred separate sermons. Augustine wrote a manual on preaching, *De doctrina christiana*, "On Christian teaching", that is still worth reading in our day. He talks about the value of studying the text in the original languages, the great value of literary studies to preaching and the importance of mastering the use of language.

Augustine said, "For there is a joy which is not given to the wicked, but rather to them who serve You for Your own sake; for such people, You Yourself are Joy." He believed that we achieve true freedom not by doing what we want, but by conforming our wills perfectly to the will of God, so that nothing in us rebels against Him. In our times, in which comfort has been eliminated from the public square and replaced by fearful forebodings, Augustine's message is very much needed. When the Roman empire was collapsing and the barbarians were taking over, he knew no other comfort and encouragement than the Gospel of hope. He knew no other Christ than the One Who said: "Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the key of death and Hades" (Rev. 1:17,18).

"Nothing is so easy to denounce, nothing is so difficult to understand," so wrote Augustine on original sin. And the debate about original sin has continued unabated throughout the

centuries. Many believers as well as unbelievers have found its core affirmations preposterous. Some blame the apostle Paul and Augustine for inventing the doctrine of original sin as we know it. Others describe Augustine's view as "macabre", "gloomy", "repulsive", "revolting" and an "insult to humanity."

Optimistic View of Human Nature

From time to time in Western history, a vision of the greatness of human moral potential emerges or arises. No wonder the doctrine of original sin goes against the grain of modern society. Despite contrary evidence, the 21st century remains enamoured with the concept of progress. The belief that we are in command of our own destinies is still strong. It seems that the faith of "progressives" cannot be shaken. They are certain that human beings are steadily becoming wiser and therefore better. We are moving to an ever-greater freedom and material prosperity, and we are doing so by human effort alone, especially through science. Saving the earth through climate change is the new religion for multitudes in the West. The ecological gospel of saving whales, rescuing seals, and so forth promises our salvation from mutual destruction and the achievement of universal harmony. Many can't wait for the dawning of a wondrous new era in human history once the environmental concerns are overcome and mankind learns to live in peace. But if we are progressing morally, how can we explain all the wars waged throughout the 20th century and the wars being fought at this very moment?

Pelagius (c.354-c.420)

About the year 380, the lay monk Pelagius arrived in Rome from his native Britain. He was shocked by what he saw. He was even more shocked when he found out how some Christians justified their sinful life. They told him that they had no power to overcome original sin. They believed that it was impossible to do anything good unless God directly brought it about by an act of grace. In other words, if we are predestined to sin or to grace, why make any effort? Pelagius felt that Christians should, above all, live right and seek holiness. He rejected the notion of original sin. He stressed the fact that human beings have free will, and it is up to them to use it properly. They are not trapped by sin. Individual human beings have the capacity to save themselves. Pelagius argued that it is possible to live without sin if you really put your mind to it. We must look to Christ as an example of perfect obedience, and it is up to us to follow it. Pelagius insisted that no matter how strict and forbidding the moral law seems, we remain capable of keeping it and are found wanting for not doing so. Every Christian should live the kind of disciplined and holy existence that monks and nuns strive to live, lest he suffers the pain of eternal punishment. He saw the Church as a community of baptized believers committed to strive for perfection. His emphasis, therefore, was not so much on the human ability to live perfectly as on our *responsibility* to do so.

In time a theological system developed which took its name from Pelagius. With its stress on the primacy of the human will in taking the initiative in salvation, and its optimistic view of human nature, Pelagianism came to be seen as a religion of human autonomy, which held that human beings are able to take the initiative in their own salvation. Today, Pelagianism's influence is evident in some evangelical and charismatic circles. In his book, *Original Sin: A Cultural History*, Alan Jacobs argues that Pelagianism, like many zealous movements of moral and spiritual reform, is a recipe for profound anxiety. Its original word of encouragement

("You can do it!") immediately leads to the self-doubting question: "But am I doing it?"

Augustine and Original Sin

Augustine became the first theologian to embrace a thoroughly Pauline view of faith and of God's sovereignty in salvation and human history. He insisted on the authority of Scripture and the sovereignty of God. God initiates the process of salvation, not men or women. The human mind has become darkened and weakened by sin. Sin makes it impossible for the human mind to understand spiritual truths and ideas. Humanity, left to its own devices and resources, can never enter into a relationship with God. It is only by "grace", the unmerited or undeserved gift of God, that God voluntarily breaks the hold of sin on humanity. Augustine asked, if Pelagius is right, "how is it possible for a people to praise God?" Sin is already inside us, already indwelling in us at our origin.

Augustine taught that original sin is the consequence of the "the Fall" (Gen.3). It expresses the idea that human nature has "fallen" from its original "good" state. Augustine hears the apostle Paul saying that the sin of Adam is also our own sin. Because of the Fall, humans were made sinners (Rom.5:12-19). In other words, we have inherited from our first father Adam not just a debt, but also a compulsion to reenact his alienation from God. Therefore even infants are born sinners, their origin being the primal fatherhood of fallen Adam. Far from possessing "freedom of the will," humans are in possession of a will that is corrupted and tainted by sin, and which biases them toward evil and away from God. And Augustine states that the proof of our fallen nature is our mortality; as the apostle says, "the wages of sin is death" (Rom.6:23). And if this is so, how then are Christians able to praise God? God does not leave us where we are naturally, incapacitated by sin and unable to redeem ourselves, but gives us the grace that we may be healed, forgiven and restored. We are totally dependent on God for our salvation, from the beginning to the end of our lives. Augustine insisted on the priority of the grace of God at every stage in the Christian life, from its beginning to its end. One of his favourite biblical texts was, "apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). So forceful was his defence of grace that he later became known as "the doctor of grace." Augustine took issue with Pelagianism because he was convinced that its emphasis on free will and human merit denied divine grace and the power of the cross of Christ. Pelagius and his followers were condemned in 418 by Pope Zosimus and later more strongly by the North African bishops meeting in Carthage. Pelagianism was also condemned by the Council of Ephesus in 431.

Three Augustinians

Through the centuries following his death, Augustine's teachings on original sin didn't fade into oblivion. In his *Augustine: A New Biography*, postmodernist James J. O'Donnell claims that a modern reader is probably inclined to root for Pelagius. And he adds, "Certainly very, very few readers except the most devout Calvinist will find themselves with the Augustinian view." Indeed, John Calvin agreed with Augustine's view on original sin and grace. He wrote, "You may therefore talk about Christ, but it is to no purpose except with those who are genuinely humbled and realize how much they need a Redeemer, by whose mediation they may escape the destruction of eternal death."

Another Augustinian was the brilliant mathematician and scientist, Blaise Pascal (1623-1662). For Pascal the Parisian Jesuits' view that original sin hinders us little or not at all in our quest for righteousness insults humans and God alike. The God Whom he encountered on the night of his conversion was a God of "Fire". Our God is a God of "raging fire", writes the author of Hebrews (10:27). And "it is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (10:31). American theologian and philosopher, Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), known today primarily for his sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," has been called "the Augustine," and the "Calvin of his age." One of his many books was entitled, *Original Sin* (published posthumously). He forcefully argued that the great Christian doctrine of original sin is the best explanation for the "apparent and acknowledged fact" of human "ruin".

Obama's "Yes, we can" is now a popular slogan. He argues that if we have only the will power, we can look forward with confidence to the coming of the much-heralded "new world order." But such a view of life is fundamentally and tragically wrong. We cannot change the world through our own sheer will- power. Much as we dislike doing so, and however painful it may be to our pride, we must confess with Augustine and the testimony of all of Scripture that the source of our own wrong doings is within us (Jer. 17:9). Original sin is the problem of all humanity. Because the simple fact is, noted Augustine, this means that we are in the position of being seriously ill, and unable to diagnose our own illness adequately, let alone cure it. God's one remedy for sin then is the death of his Son, and our proper response to this remedy is to simply accept it.

It is obvious that Pelagius and Augustine have very different views of human nature. For Augustine, human nature is weak and powerless; for Pelagius it is autonomous and self-sufficient. For Augustine, salvation is an unmerited gift; for Pelagius salvation is a justly earned reward. Pelagianism is a creed for heroes, but Augustine's emphasis on original sin and the consequent absolute dependence on the grace of God gives hope to the waverer, the backslider, and assurance of salvation. The Gospel is still "the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Rom. 1:16; cf. 1 Cor. 1:18).

Why did mighty Rome fall into the hands of the barbarian hordes under Alaric in 410 A.D.? Pagans charged that it was punishment for Rome's infidelity to the ancient gods. They argued that Christianity had destroyed the old faith which had given moral character to the Roman soul and stability to the Roman state. They claimed it taught individual salvation through asceticism and prayer, rather than collective salvation through devotion to the state. Augustine in his *City of God*, a literary masterpiece, pointed out that the afflictions visited on Rome was a just punishment for its moral degradation. He said that it was not the Christianity of the emperor which had brought ruin upon the Empire, but the vices within the Empire itself. Rather than blaming Christianity, the blame should fall upon dying paganism.

The City of Man versus The City of God

For Augustine history was the struggle of two opposite principles - The City of God and the City of Man. The city of Man belongs to time, to earthly history. The City of God is the opposite. It is a mystical spiritual creation. It is as old as the Gospel. The City of Man is divided against itself. It is the kind of hostility which separated Cain and Abel. It illustrates the hatred that exists between the two cities.

Cain was the first-born and belonged to the City of Man. This city relies on its own strength, represented in its rulers. "If you consider human affairs and our common nature," Augustine says, you have to admit that these rulers, by their war making want to reach glorious peace." Hence "it is obvious that peace is the end sought for by war. For every man seeks peace by waging war, but no man seeks war by making peace." The City of Man desires earthly peace for the sake of enjoying earthly goods, and makes war in order to attain this peace. "Nevertheless," says Augustine, "while history lasts, it has a finality of its own; it reaches such happiness by sharing common good as is possible when there are not goods but the things of time to afford it happiness."

But if we live in a Cain and Abel society, why do we still see good in this world? Because God does not wholly desert those whom He condemns, nor shuts up His tender mercies in His anger. And the human race is restrained by law and education, which keep guard against the ignorance that besets us, and opposes the assaults of vice. We must also recognize how much the sickness of this world is due to spiritual causes. In other words, we cannot usher in the Kingdom. We may easily lose ourselves in the political and humanitarian struggles and miss the real fight between the Lord Christ and the "prince of the world." The "two cities," Augustine notes, "are entangled together in this world, and intermixed until the Last Judgment brings about their separation," and their history together is a "checkered" one.

Political Augustine

For Augustine, religion is not a mere private department of life. Religion is a way of life, as wide as living. It embraces every activity and every department in life, including politics. Christ is the supreme Lord. I believe, therefore, that Augustine's *City of God* still has a fresh message for our time, in which there seems to be a bankruptcy of political thought adequate to meet the situations of this century. There is much at stake in healthy politics. Government is from God, but the Bible calls us to do what we can do to direct politics in such a way that it brings glory to God and blessing to all peoples. We are not a mere collection of individuals. "Being a citizen," Augustine says, "he must not be all for himself, but sociable in his life and actions." A Christian citizen must take a lively interest in the welfare of the whole community, Christian or non-Christian, of which he is a part. He *must* care, he cannot be negative or neutral. Wherever he lives, a Christian has not only the right but the duty to be concerned about his fellow-man and about the preservation of justice. What is justice? It is that virtue which gives everyone his due. "Where, then, is the justice of man when he deserts the true God and yields himself to impure demons?" For Augustine wisdom is always eminently practical. A law is enacted because it is right: it is not right because it is enacted. "What is done unjustly is done unlawfully. For we may not imagine men's unjust decrees to be laws." Therefore, justice without faith in God and apart from His love can only be a relative thing. True justice has no existence save in that republic whose founder and ruler is Christ. Without justice, what are kingdoms but great robberies? Peace of the unjust man is not worthy to be called peace in comparison with the peace of the just. Peace between man and God is the well-ordered obedience of faith to eternal law.

In North America, Christians are inclined to separate politics from their faith commitment. They may wonder whether it is even useful to become involved in politics in a society which is

becoming more averse to Christianity. But Augustine would say that not for one moment should Christians let the lines of right and wrong be blurred because of apparent political powerlessness. For all Christian citizens, there is the obligation to speak courageously whenever God demands it.

The Love of God

Augustine's definition of love is cast in a negative form. What is not loved for its own sake and in its own right is actually not loved at all. Love does not have the restricted meaning as it has in English. Augustine's understanding of love has nothing to do with the sentimental feelings. Only love of something for its own sake counts as love. It reinforces the claim for love for wisdom, love for God, and it is exclusive. Love must love for God alone. And this love for the eternal, affects the present. Love, in seeking the eternal, unites persons in the common bond of love shared without threat or envy; it creates a social order that is not rooted in the fear of loss. A Christian lives by faith, which works by love, that love where man loves God as He ought to be loved, and his neighbour as himself. Love underlies both faith and hope (1 Cor. 13:13). But love needs to be guided and channelled by justice. Therefore, Augustine can advocate that we must "love the sinner but hate the sin."

The City of God

Augustine was a pioneer in the study of the meaning of history. Before his time, historians were chiefly storytellers. Humans were regarded as puppets bound to the wheel of fate. No linear progress was possible. Humans lived on a huge merry-go-round from which escape was utterly impossible. This view can be summed up in one word: fatalism. How then are we going to be able to see any logic in the sequence of political, economic, and social events – unless there is meaning on a higher level? Augustine's greatest and lasting contribution to a Christian view of history is his *The City of God*. The first half is a brilliant refutation of pagan religions. Equally brilliant is the second half, which seeks to lay the groundwork of a total theology of history, from the moment of creation to the final restoration in Christ. With Creation and the Fall the history of humankind began; that is the centuries-old story of the two cities, a story which will end with the final triumph of the City of God, the ultimate and true final cause of the divine work of Creation.

Seen in the light of the Gospel, the development of world history is a no less striking "confession" of the love and power of God than the sight of His Creation. Augustine broke the ancient wheel of fate by appealing to one great event that cannot be repeated nor denied: "Christ died but once for our sins; now that He is risen from the dead, He will die no more." The uniqueness of redemption freed men's minds and wills from Greek determinism and fatalism. History is not without purpose. God did not create man in vain, Christ did not die in vain. The events of temporal history are actions in the drama of redemption and eternal salvation. They show that the rise and fall of empires is not ruled by chance, by fate, or by the stars but only by the true God, who wills to confer earthly glory upon those who live up to the moral standards of the earthly city.

God is sovereign. He changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings" (Dan. 2:21). In the light of God's providence, human events become significant. Augustine aims to

show how, with all the blood, sweat and tears, with all the class struggles, promoting the general welfare, at home, by means of law and education, abroad, by means of trade, diplomacy and war, it is not the will of humankind, but the will of God that is accomplished in history.

Augustine saw a world in ruins. We see our world on the brink of self-destruction. But we have hope. Fatalism has no place in the Christian's perspective on world events. The best is yet to come. *The City of God* shows us that here we have no abiding city. We are looking forward to the Creation of the new heaven and earth. This hope enables Christians to suffer with patience and hope not available to others. But Augustine warns Christians not to speculate about the date of Christ's return. He says, "It is a waste of effort for us to attempt counting the precise number of years which this world has yet to go, since we know from the mouth of Truth that is none of our business." But Christians do not wait for Christ's return with folded arms. They are active for the Lord's Kingdom and the spread of the Gospel. They know there can't be a compromise with the world, but that God must come first. As Augustine put it: "Those who wish to follow God allow him to go before and they follow; they do not make him follow while they go before."

Conclusion

The ransacking of Rome had been merely a start. In 430 A.D. Genseric the Vandal and his warriors rampaged across North Africa and laid siege to Hippo. Yet in the darkness of the hour, Augustine, stretching a hand across time, sang a song of victory. He points to the "most glorious society and celestial city of God's faithful," and goes on to prophesy that this city shall "obtain the last victory, and be crowned in perfection of peace," even though it is "partly seated in the course of these declining times." As his city lay beleaguered by the barbarians' blockade, Augustine died at peace with the Lord, Whom he had served so faithfully ever since his conversion.

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Feb. 2009