



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

Church History – Part One (100-1500 AD)

Lesson 21 – Augustine of Hippo, the Influential Theologian

Augustine was born in 354 AD in a small town in northern Africa to a pagan father and a Christian mother named Monica. Monica constantly prayed for the conversion of her highly gifted son. His parents sent him to Carthage (in North Africa) for his education. There he studied and partied well, keeping company with a concubine who gave him a son named Adeodatus. Augustine learned the art of rhetoric (persuasive speaking) and became especially fond of the oratory (the manner of public speaking) of Cicero, who had lived in Rome's golden age. As a seeker of truth, Augustine became a follower of a Persian teacher named Mani, who taught that there are two principles in the world: spiritual light and material darkness. To be saved one must separate from the material darkness and prepare for the life of the spirit. This meant that one must avoid sex and procreation.

The followers of Mani were called Manichaeans. At first Augustine saw this religion as solving the problem of evil in this world. He came to believe that the Old Testament, with its record of so many horrible sins, was the product of an evil principle rather than of a good God. But when Augustine met a Manichaean philosopher named Faustus, he was unable to answer Augustine's profound questions.

After serving as a teacher in Carthage, Augustine moved to Rome and then to Milan, where he found a job teaching rhetoric. In that city Augustine became a follower of a popular philosophy known as Neoplatonism. Neoplatonism taught spiritual fulfillment through study, discipline, and meditation on one Supreme Being, who gave off emanations like circles of water caused by throwing of a rock into the water. As some emanations moved far from their source, they became immoral, and this was the source of evil in the world.

Augustine's mother Monica lived with him in Milan. She suggested that he listen to the preaching of Ambrose, who had a reputation as a brilliant orator. As a rhetorician, Augustine was interested in Ambrose's style of speaking. As he attended these services, Ambrose's explanations of the Old Testament made sense to him, and he began to wonder whether Christianity was the real truth he was seeking. But now he had a new problem: if the teaching of the Christ and the Bible was really true, then he would have to change his sinful way of life. And so we are told that his "prayer" at that time was this: "Give me chastity and continence, but not right away" (Gonzalez: *The Story of Christianity*, Part 1, p. 211). Augustine believed that if he became a real Christian, he could no longer be a teacher of rhetoric, nor could he enjoy the pleasures of living with a concubine or of living a normal life

in this world. In those days it was believed that a real Christian would have to live the life of a monk or a hermit.

While he was thus struggling with this inner conflict, he heard a child call out: “Take and read.” He took this as a sign and opened his Bible to these words: **“Let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly, as in the day, not in revelry and drunkenness, not in lewdness and lust, not in strife and envy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, and fulfill its lusts”** (Romans 13:12-14). These words convinced Augustine to make a clean break with his old life. He and his son were baptized by Ambrose, and he decided to move back to northern Africa with his mother and son and become a monk. But instead of marrying his concubine, as would have been the loving thing to do for her sake, he dismissed her as being unworthy of him, as his mother suggested. In those days a sexual life was considered by many an evil thing even within marriage. Increasingly it was thought that a bishop or priest or monk or nun could lead a much holier life if they were not married, but this is not the teaching of Scripture. This false teaching and practice eventually led to many grievous evils, which are still troubling some churches today.

Monica died on the journey to Africa, and Adeodatus died soon after that. Augustine was now free to establish a monastery devoted to study and meditation. At his monastery Augustine began to write the philosophical and theological works for which he became famous. But he continued to learn, and late in his life he wrote a book of retractions in which he corrected many of his earlier writings.

When Augustine was still in his thirties, he happened to attend a church service in a town called Hippo. Soon he was called to serve as a presbyter (priest) in Hippo, and soon after that, he was consecrated to be the bishop of the Hippo congregation, where he remained for the rest of his life. Now he could no longer spend his time chiefly on study and meditation; he had a congregation to care for. There were false teachings abounding in the area, and he had to refute these ideas for the sake of his flock. One of those heresies was his former religion of Manichaeism. The Manichees had come to believe in fatalism, that everything was predetermined, and that there is no such thing as free will. Augustine now argued, against his former views, that there is one God who is good, and that no evil originated with Him. But some of His creatures rebelled against Him, first of all among the spirit beings (angels), and then human beings, who used their free will to sin against God and bring evil into the world.

Another heretical view that was still prevalent in northern Africa was Donatism (see lesson 13). The Donatists taught that the validity of an act depended on the worthiness of the pastor or bishop performing the act. They called into question the baptisms performed by unbelieving administrators, particularly those who had failed to confess Christ faithfully in time of persecution. On this point Augustine argued correctly that basing the validity of

baptism on the faith of the administrator would make every baptism doubtful and baptism would no longer be an assurance from God that could be trusted.

Some Donatists had also taken up arms to force their views on their opponents. In connection with this discussion Augustine developed a method of determining whether a war was just or not. He stressed three principles in particular:

1. the purpose of the war must be just and not simply an excuse for gaining land or showing off power.
2. a war can be waged only by secular government, not by individuals or a church.
3. even in time of war the motive for waging and carrying out the war must be love.

Many Christians have adopted or adapted these principles as agreeing with Scriptural truth.

But the heresy against which Augustine did his best and most lasting work was a false teaching introduced by Pelagius, a monk from Britain (England). Pelagius believed that a man's free will was so powerful that man was able to do everything that God required. According to Pelagius, human beings have the power to overcome their sin. Augustine showed from Scripture and from his own experience that it is impossible for fallen man to stop sinning. Adam and Eve were free to sin or not sin, but now the only freedom we have is to choose between various kinds of sin. In other words, Augustine restored the Bible doctrine of original sin, which had begun to slip away from Christian teaching through the years. In fact, it was not uncommon for Christian teachers to speak of a Christian contributing to his own salvation by showing love for the poor and doing other religious acts.

Augustine emphasized the Biblical truth that no person can decide to become a Christian by their own free will. The fact is: we are saved alone by grace, not by anything we can do. We become Christians through the working of the Holy Spirit through the Word of God. Conversion is the work of God, and because of man's inborn sin one cannot contribute anything positive to one's own conversion. Pelagius, on the other hand, rejected the doctrine of original sin, and he taught that children are without sin until they decide of their own free will to do something that is evil.

Augustine wrote extensively against the views of Pelagius, and eventually the extreme views of Pelagius were rejected by the church. But many church teachers tried to find some middle ground between Augustine and Pelagius and ended up teaching what is called "Semi-Pelagianism". These teachers wanted to teach salvation by grace, but they rejected Augustine's views on predestination. Predestination is the Biblical teaching that believers in Christ were chosen by God from eternity to be saved, and that this choosing was not based at all in any way on the person chosen, but it is entirely a matter of God's grace or undeserved love.

It is a sad truth that by the time of Augustine the distinction between Law and Gospel was not always properly taught, and man's works were often mixed with God's grace as a cause

of salvation. This confusion has continued in the Roman Catholic church from that day to the present, as we shall see when we consider the history of the Reformation in the sixteenth century. The Synod of Orange in 529 AD did approve of Augustine's teaching that we are saved by grace, but in the years that followed, this teaching was corrupted, neglected, and practically rejected by the majority of church teachers and leaders.

Besides his important writings against the Pelagians, Augustine is known for two other famous books. Augustine wrote *Confessions* as his autobiography. In it, he examined in great detail the way that God led him to faith in Christ through a long period of searching and doubting. There is nothing quite like this book in the writings of past ages. One of Augustine's most famous sayings comes from *Confessions*: "You have made us for Yourself, and our hearts do not rest until they find their rest in You."

The other book is *The City of God*. Augustine was still living when Rome fell in 410 AD. The many pagans who remained in the Roman Empire blamed this fall on the rise of Christianity. They claimed that Rome fell because it abandoned the ancient gods. Augustine wrote *The City of God* in response to these charges. It was his view that throughout history there are two cities that appear side by side: the earthly city that is built on self-love and self-interest and the city of God that is built on the love of God. Eventually all earthly cities will pass away, like the Roman Empire, and only the city of God will remain. God had used of the Roman Empire for a time to spread of the Gospel, but now the time for its demise had come, as it had come for every previous world power, such as Egypt, Assyria, Persia, and Greece,

When Augustine died, the Vandals were attacking the city of Hippo. Soon the Roman civilization in northern Africa and southern Europe was nowhere to be found. A new era in world history – and in church history – was about to begin. The barbarians (Goths, Vandals, and others) from beyond the borders of the Roman Empire attacked at will and set up their own kingdoms. The western Roman Empire was no more. The authority of the empire was replaced by the power of the Church of Rome, which was ruled by its bishop. The bishop of Rome soon claimed authority over both church and state and became known as the pope, the vicar of Christ on earth. The barbarians living in the West were gradually became Christians to some extent, but ancient superstitions also survived. Many of the so-called barbarians had been converted to the Arian version of Christianity by an Arian missionary named Ulfilas. Ulfilas had even translated the Bible into the language of the Goths. Eventually most of these Arians were also led to accept the Nicene Creed, but this took place over a long period of time.

The center of the Roman Empire was no longer Rome but Constantinople. The eastern Roman Empire was ruled from Constantinople, and it continued for another thousand years. This empire became known as the Byzantine Empire since another name for Constantinople was Byzantium. Today this city is called Istanbul (in modern-day Turkey). The Christians in the East were also troubled by heresies of various kinds, as we shall see in future lessons.

Questions:

1. What false ideas did Augustine follow when he was a young man?
2. Who kept on praying for his conversion to Christianity?
3. What is the study of rhetoric?
4. How was Augustine brought to faith in Christ?
5. Why did Augustine not marry the mother of his son?
6. What kind of life did Augustine plan for himself after he became a Christian?
7. What changed Augustine's plans to follow this kind of life?
8. Against which three heresies did Augustine have to fight?
9. Summarize the false views of these three heresies.
10. Why can we call Augustine a theologian of grace?
11. Why is it important to stress that the law of God cannot save us?
12. Why is it important to stress that we are saved by grace alone?
13. What is Augustine's philosophy of history found in his book *The City of God*?
14. What important event took place shortly before the deaths of Jerome and Augustine?
15. What institution took over authority after the western empire fell?
16. How did it happen that many of the barbarian Goths were Arians?