

CHAPTER 6

THE LIFE AND WORK OF AUGUSTINE

Augustine (354-430) spans the fourth and fifth centuries, and was in some ways the greatest father of the ancient church. After his death the church soon passed into its medieval phase. Because of his importance to church history (even to Western history in general), it is appropriate that we devote an entire chapter to him.

Importance of Augustine

able leader of church

more writing than any other except Origen and Jerome

greatest thinker in early church: “sage of the ages” –Bruce Shelley

tremendous conversion experience; documented

three important controversies:

Manichean, Donatist, Pelagian

*big influence on church history (Roman Catholic theology and Protestant theology)

- 1) interpretation method (allegory)
- 2) politics (two spheres)
- 3) eschatology (amillennialism)
- 4) Augustinianism leads to Reformation (Calvinism = renewed Augustinianism)

marks transition from classical to medieval period

Early life

primary source: his *Confessions*; also friends' biographies of him

Aurelius Augustinus was born in Tagaste, north Africa (Nov. 13, 354); father a middle-class pagan (converted shortly before his death in 370); his mother Monica a Christian; made him a catechumen; he had a brother and a sister

12 years old, sent to school in Tagaste, then to Madaura; studied law (desire of his father)

engaged in boyhood pranks and sins; fell into lust and immorality

18 years old, went to Carthage to school, switched to literature and rhetoric; great ability, but did not master Greek

became a teacher; took a concubine, had a son (Adeodatus, “Gift of God”); lived with concubine 13 years

19 years old, read Cicero’s (lost) *Hortensius*, became a lover of philosophy; rejected Bible as too simplistic; for nine years an aspirant of Manichaeans; had serious doubts about God, etc., involving astronomical statements; bishop Faustus could not answer them

26 years old, wrote work on aesthetics, *The Beautiful and the Fitting* (work now lost)

29 years old, sailed to Rome for money and fame in law and teaching; left mother behind—she followed later; during all this time, mother Monica praying for him, dismayed by his unbelief; a bishop friend told her, “A son of so many prayers cannot be lost.”

30 years old, moved to Milan to be professor of rhetoric; heard and admired Ambrose; followed neo-Platonists; mother came, arranged suitable marriage, to take place in one or two years; concubine sent home, became a nun in Africa; instead, Augustine took another concubine; but mentally was accepting Christianity (allegorism explained difficulties) at this time he said, “God give me charity, but not yet”

Conversion

32 years old, heard story of St. Anthony and monks; in garden, under fig tree, heard child playing, “*Take up and read, take up and read.*” Opened nearby Bible to Romans 13:13-14: “Not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature.”

strong, dramatic, tearful conversion; recognized conversion as by grace alone; retired and philosophized about a year; baptized by Ambrose in Milan with son, Adeodatus who died next year at age 18.

returned to home town in Africa; Monica died in Ostia, on the way; happy her son was saved; arrived home, sold father’s estate, organized a small monastery (first one in north Africa—beginning of Augustinian order, oldest extant order in Roman Catholic church); desired to contemplate, conquer desires of flesh, and pursue studies

Augustine as bishop

Hippo, port city west of Carthage; large Donatist and Manichean churches there, small Catholic church; Augustine went there to answer Manicheans; elderly bishop there needed helper, asked Augustine; ordained a presbyter (over his protest); made auxiliary bishop

42 years old (396), became bishop of Hippo; remained the bishop for 34 years, until his death

promoted monasticism in north Africa; training school for future bishops; excellent preaching and administration; against feasts, etc., supported clerical asceticism

Augustine's *Confessions*

wrote them when about 43-45 years old; they go up to the death of his mother; the greatest Christian autobiography

Manichean controversy

debated Mani, bishop in Hippo; defeated him (Donatists thrilled):

God's sovereignty explains reality better than dualism can

sin is necessary for the free choice of man

wrote against Manicheanism (e.g., *Confessions*)

Donatist controversy

Donatist schism continued

not great doctrinal difference, but rather one of ecclesiastical administration that resulted in two churches with two sets of officers

rejected Felix since he was accused as a traitor; they thought his ordination invalid, and his sacraments invalid; Augustine said sacraments are valid if the form is valid, the character of the administrator is not the issue; arguing did not lead to reconciliation

hostilities broke out; chief baker not willing to sell to Catholics; Catholics accused Donatist deacons with avarice; Donatist "circumciliators" carried clubs ("Israel's") to keep Donatists from attending Catholic services

Augustine decided argument useless, appealed for intervention by the government; used Luke 14:23, "compel them to come in," said use of force was appropriate; later the Inquisition would follow this precedent based on this text!

408, court case decided which side was true—Augustine won; all Donatist churches turned over to Catholics

Augustine's *City of God*

1. Political situation

barbarian invasions strong after Theodosius died in 395; Goths under Alaric sacked Rome for three days in 410 (city had been free for 700 years)

2. Pagan reaction

pagans said Rome forsaken by the gods because it had become Christian

3. Augustine's answer

took 14 years to write book (410-424), many interruptions

gods did not help Rome ever, or her enemies; rather, Rome punished by God for its wickedness (churches spared); besides, Rome was part of the city of man

city of man mixed with evil, though it does good; city of God most important; kingdom passages in Scripture spiritualized to refer to the church, invisible and visible

4. Effects of the book

comfort during barbarian take-over

Established idea of "two overlapping spheres" responsible to God

later used to support papal supremacy over earthly affairs

first rigorous Christian philosophy of history

strong force for amillennialism

Augustine and Jerome

There was an extensive correspondence between these two fathers. At first they fought. In this stage Augustine sent five letters to the older Jerome:

- 1) when Augustine in early 30's, he sent famous Jerome in Bethlehem a letter, never arrived or answered
- 2) next letter disagreed with Jerome's interpretation of Galatians 2:11-14; carrier showed Augustine's letter to friends in Rome; anti-Jerome clergy gleeful; Jerome's friends told him; no answer
- 3) Augustine sent friendly letter; sarcastic answer
- 4) Augustine sent friendly letter, but disagreed on a translation in Jonah; another sarcastic answer

5) Augustine sent explanatory letter; bitter answer

eventually, correspondence ironed out animosity; mutual admiration; Jerome supported Augustine in his controversy with Pelagius

Pelagian controversy

(411-431)

1. Promoters of Pelagianism

a. Pelagius (fl. 390-420)

British monk named Morgan (“of the sea”—Gk. *pelagios*); orderly and outwardly pious

his beliefs:

all men born in same condition as Adam—able to be perfect or to sin

no original sin, only random, sinful acts

cause of sin: bad example in sinful parents

perfect people existed before Christ, and we also can be perfect

no special divine grace is necessary for conversion and holiness, although he felt baptism put sin and guilt behind oneself

therefore, had legalistic standards of holiness and sanctification leading toward perfection: the law of God and example of Christ help us to live without sin.

This led to a stoic conception of ascetic self-control as opposed to Augustine’s “being appended by the grace of Christ” (Phil. 3:13).

Summary: Man has the 1) possibility, 2) will, and 3) power to live a sinless life

b. Celestius (fl. 400-430)

Roman lawyer; converted to monasticism and Pelagianism by Pelagius in Rome; more able and consistent debater for Pelagianism than Pelagius was

c. Julian of Eclanum (ca. 380-455)

bishop of Eclanum in Italy (near Rome); gifted scholar in Latin, Greek, logic, theology;

most systematic proponent of Pelagianism

refused to give up views when required to do so by pope Zosimus in 418; deposed and banished; visited and received by Theodore of Mopsuestia and by Nestorius in Constantinople; continued to defend views from exile in Sicily (was a schoolmaster there)

1. Beginning of the controversy

409, Pelagius moved from Britain to Rome; wrote short commentary on epistles of Paul; tried to improve corrupt morals in Rome; converted Celestius to his cause

410, Visigoth Alaric sacked Rome; chaos and poverty

411, Pelagius and Celestius escaped to north Africa; passed through Hippo to meet Augustine (he not there), left friendly letters for him; Pelagius moved east, to Palestine; Celestius remained, sought ordination as a presbyter in Carthage; Celestius gained friends and adherents, but also aroused suspicions and enemies by his novel doctrines; synod in Carthage rejected his application and excluded him from communion of the church; Augustine not yet involved

412, 414, Augustine wrote treatises against Pelagianism, because spreading in Africa; Donatist struggle subsiding by this time

2. Controversy in Palestine

eastern church not so alert to controversies in anthropology and soteriology (more concerned with Christology); eastern church followed an undefined synergism of divine and human will in conversion (Gk. *sun ergon*, "work together"); fit with both Pelagian and Augustinian ideas; eastern church did not recognize Augustine as anyone special

but two western leaders were in Palestine at the time, Jerome and Orosius (a student of Jerome's from Spain)

during this time eastern church was divided over Origen; pro-Origen faction tended to be pro-Pelagius as well, because of similarity of expression concerning freedom of the will

414-415, controversy broke out between Pelagius and Jerome; series of written rebuttals

415, bishop John of Jerusalem called synod to examine Pelagius

Orosius opposed Pelagius, referred to Augustine, but John admired Origen over Augustine

Pelagius had another advantage: John spoke Greek, Orosius spoke Latin, but Pelagius spoke both languages

Pelagius temporarily approved; case to be taken to Rome to pope Innocent

Dec., 415, another synod in Palestine; Pelagius and Celestius approved; their views not clearly represented

416, Pelagian mob broke into Jerome's monastery in Bethlehem and burned it; beat up many monks; bishop John never disciplined mob leaders

4. Controversy in Rome

416, two African synods met, condemned Pelagius, sent their conclusions to pope Innocent; Augustine and four other bishops sent a private letter to Innocent, asking him to condemn Pelagianism; Pelagius also sent a letter, but it did not arrive until after Innocent died in 417; Innocent understood the situation, agreed with condemnation of Pelagius and Celestius

*Augustine said in sermon: "Two synods and Rome agree; the matter is finished"; later misquoted by Romanists as follows: "Rome has spoken, the matter is finished"

417, Innocent died, replaced by pope Zosimus; Zosimus lacked theological strength; letter from Pelagius arrived; Celestius came to Rome and pleaded cause; Zosimus supported them, sent letter blasting Africans; Celestius left Rome vindicated

418, African synod at Carthage with more than two hundred bishops; strongly protested and disagreed with Zosimus, said he was deceived; Africans got emperor Honorius to issue edicts against Pelagians

Zosimus changed mind, sent letter everywhere anathematizing Pelagius and Celestius; ordered anyone refusing to cooperate to be deposed, banished, and property confiscated; eighteen Italian bishops refused to subscribe to Zosimus's letter, and were deposed (some later recanted and were restored); most able and distinguished of these deposed bishops was Julian of Eclanum; Julian continued in writing, debated with Augustine (much of this material is preserved)

5. The controversy resolved

419, Theodore of Mopsuestia wrote for free-will (died, 428); but gradually Pelagianism lost face in the churches

429, patriarch Nestorius of Constantinople received Julian and Celestius; interceded to pope and emperor for them, in vain; Pelagius and Celestius passed from scene; time and place of death unknown; Augustine died in 430; Julian lived out his days as schoolmaster in Sicily, died ca. 450

431, *third ecumenical council (Ephesus); condemned Pelagianism, not so much for its doctrine as for its links to Nestorius

eastern church officially condemns Pelagianism, but never accepted Augustinianism; synergistic

Roman church rejected Pelagianism, but soon fell from Augustinianism;
in 529 the Roman church officially became semi-Pelagian (no predestination) at the Synod of Orange in Gaul. This synod

- 1) condemned Pelagianism
- 2) condemned Augustine's double predestination
- 3) gave prominence to good works in salvation (synergism)
- 4) taught the freedom of the will (like Erasmus), but not the possibility nor power of the will to come to God of its own

Augustinianism slept in Romanism until reawakened during the Reformation followed by stirrings in RC Jansenist movement

Augustine and the church of Rome

1. Immediate effect of Augustine's work on the Roman system

a. Respect for Rome

increased respect for bishop of Rome (but not having authority in north Africa over bishops)

famous sermon: "synods and Rome have spoken"

*but opposed Zosimus; rule passed in north Africa that no north African churchman could appeal to Rome

b. Donatist schism

Augustine taught

- 1) there is no church perfectly pure, contrary to the club-carrying Donatists; this gave impetus to only one organized church, enforced by the government
- 2) ministers are only channels of God's grace, despite their own person character failures; this led to a sacerdotal view of grace dispensed by priestly officers

c. *City of God*

title taken to represent the church; concept of invisible-visible church;
essence: "love of temporal vs. love of God;" therefore the church is the only community working to build up the love of God in the world;
*authority of God given to the church: led to 1) idea of apostolic succession, and 2) the church dominating the state

2. Ultimate effect of his work

teachings of the doctrines of grace (=Augustinianism); became central to the Reformation

Augustine's other writings

"On the Trinity" = final form of western teaching on the trinity

- 1) full equality of Father, Son, and Spirit
- 2) Holy Spirit proceeds from Father and from the Son (as in revised Athanasian Creed)

philosophical works.—(early in Christian life) Platonistic framework, important in philosophy

exegetical works and sermons.—lengthy works on Genesis, Psalms, Galatians, 1 John, part of Romans; also practical subjects, ethics, etc.

letters.—270 of them; discuss all important subjects of the time

controversial works.—surveyed 28 heresies; especially Manichaeism, Donatism, Arianism (Gothic soldiers came to him with questions, had been influenced by Ulfilas), Pelagianism, semi-Pelagianism

**Retractions.*—(427, three years before he died) quoted Pro. 10:19; took back statements he had written during his life; surveyed his writings as bishop

Last days of Augustine

1. Political developments

Boniface, governor of north Africa, went to Spain to meet conquering Vandals; married chief's daughter; Vandals were Arian

Roman empress (widow of Honorius) sent for Boniface to come to Rome (to be killed); Boniface called on Vandals to help him in north Africa; 40,000 with families came from Spain; eventually an army of 80,000 assembled

Vandals began taking north Africa; burned churches; conquered Morocco; Boniface told them to go back—too late; Vandals conquered all north Africa in three years

2. Augustine's death (Aug. 28, 430)

Vandals gathering around Carthage and Hippo

Augustine dying, had ten days' preparation; *had Psalm 51 written on the wall over his bed; spent time in prayer and repentance; died before Vandals arrived in Aug. 431

many escaped from Hippo; Vandals destroyed churches and much of Augustine's practical work; preserved his library and house