

ST. AUGUSTINE (354 - 430 A.D.)

But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision
for the flesh in regard to its lusts. ¹

—Romans 13:14

Augustine the Sinner. Augustine was born in North Africa, in a town called Tagaste, in the northern part of the Roman province of Numidia. ² His father was a wealthy pagan named Patricius. At age 40 Patricius married Monica, a devoutly Christian 17-year-old girl. Augustine was the eldest of three children born to Patricius and Monica. Their marriage was not happy, nor was Augustine's childhood. Patricius was carefree in his morals and abusive to his wife. Monica clung fiercely to her religion, which further estranged her from her husband.

Meanwhile, Augustine grew up with pagan morals, which valued cleverness and success above all. And Augustine was very clever. As he matured, his parents realized that he needed a greater challenge than Tagaste could offer. So at about age 12, his parents sent him to the city of Madauros, 30 miles away, to further his education. There he read a great deal, and learned a great deal more. Unfortunately, one of the things he learned was the pursuit of pleasure in all its forms, free from the restraints of family and friends. When he returned home, Patricius was delighted—and Monica was dismayed—to see Augustine's lack of scruples. For the rest of her life, Monica would devote herself to reclaiming her son for God—through her prayers, her example, and her love.

Augustine in Carthage. At age 17, Augustine went to Carthage, where opportunities for learning and immorality were even greater than at Madauros. ³ Augustine excelled at both. In his *Confessions*, he describes how his mother, Monica, warned him to avoid sexual immorality, and especially adultery. But he ignored his mother's warning, which “seemed to me no better than women's counsels.” ⁴ In Carthage he strived to outdo his peers in his debauchery,

not for the pleasure of the act only, but for the praise of it also; . . . and when I lacked opportunity to commit a wickedness that should make me as bad as the lost, I would feign myself to have done what I never did. ⁵

Augustine also learned Latin, rhetoric, mathematics, music, logic, and philosophy at Carthage. He became immensely fond of Plato. Yet here, at the University of Carthage, the seed of discontent was planted which would eventually blossom into faith. Augustine read a passage in Cicero ⁶ which talked of good and

evil, and of man's divine, immortal soul. Augustine began to question his lifestyle, and searched for something to quiet his awakening conscience. Beginning at about age 19, and continuing until he was about 29, he found some relief in Manicheism.⁷ However, he declined to adopt its practice of celibacy. Instead, shortly after his graduation from the University, he took a concubine, and in 382 A.D., at age 28, he had a son, whom he called Adeodatus (“gift of God”).

In Italy. The next few years found Augustine teaching in Tagaste and later in Carthage. His passions for books and for sexual immorality remained. Yet so did his discontent. He decided to go to Rome. Fearing for her son's safety and his soul, Monica begged him to take her with him. He agreed, and then sailed without her, leaving her at prayer in a chapel near the dock.

Rome was as unimpressed with Augustine as he was with it. His school there failed within a year when his students didn't pay their tuition, and Augustine's poverty grew along with his misery. Finally, just when it seemed that he would have to return to Africa, Augustine competed for and won a professorship in Milan. Here at last Augustine found worldly success. The professorship lifted him out of poverty. Wealthy men of Milan respected his learning and sought his company. Yet his unhappiness grew.

Ambrose and Monica. Meanwhile, Monica joined him in Milan and persuaded him to hear the preaching of Ambrose, the Bishop of Milan.⁸ Ambrose achieved fame for his insistence that the power of the Emperor and the State was subordinate to the authority of Church leaders in Church matters. Ambrose repeatedly defied the authority of the Emperor to meddle in Church affairs—and repeatedly won! Then in 390 A.D., Ambrose went even further. In that year, the Emperor Theodosius had 7,000 men, women, and children in Thessalonica massacred in retaliation for the assassination of one of his senior officers. In reaction, Ambrose refused to let the Emperor partake of Communion, or even enter the church, until he had publicly atoned for this great sin. When the Emperor tried to enter the church anyway, Ambrose barred his way. Finally, after several weeks, the Emperor humbled himself by coming to the church in ordinary clothes and begging God's forgiveness. This incident may seem trivial to us today, but such defiance in those days—when the Emperor held absolute power—often meant death. Nevertheless, Ambrose again triumphed, and in doing so he laid the foundation for the principle that even those who govern are subject to God's moral order.

At first, Augustine came to hear Ambrose because of his reputation for gifted speaking, which was widespread. But soon Augustine began paying more attention to the message than the speaker. He was deeply moved by the hymns the people sang (many of which Ambrose himself had composed). And he began to notice the peace

and contentment of the members of the congregation. Monica spent long hours in Ambrose's church, and this did not escape the notice of either Augustine or Ambrose.

The Turning Point. One day, the bishop congratulated Augustine on the piety of his mother. This innocent compliment inflamed both his love for her and his own shame. From this point forward, Augustine's conscience began to gain ascendancy. He resolved to give up his pagan philosophies and his religion of Manicheism. He discovered and appreciated the truth of Christianity.

He sent his concubine back to Africa (keeping Adeodatus with him) and agreed to marry a young girl in two years—when she turned 12. But now Augustine discovered, to his dismay, that he had become a slave to his own immorality. Within weeks he took another concubine and cancelled the marriage plans. Although it seems that he wanted to free himself from his sinful life, he found that he could not. He despised himself for his weakness.

In despair he cried out to God one day in his garden: “How long shall this be? It is always tomorrow and tomorrow! Why not this hour an end to all my meanness?” Suddenly he heard a voice in his ears, like that of a child singing nearby: “Take up and read. Take up and read.” Augustine reached for the book he had with him and read the following passage from Paul's letter to the Romans:

Let us behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts.⁹

From this point forward, Augustine knew he had found the power to overcome the sins of the flesh. And he found the victory far easier than he imagined it could be:

How sweet did it at once become to me to be without the sweetness of those baubles! What I feared to be parted from was now a joy to part with. For you cast them from me, you the true and richest sweetness. You cast them forth and in their place substituted yourself, sweeter than all delight. . . .¹⁰

He was 33 years old.

Augustine the Christian. On Easter Sunday, in 387 A.D., Augustine was baptized by Ambrose. Augustine's son, Adeodatus, and a friend, Alypius, were baptized the same day. The three newly baptized Christians, together with Monica, resolved to return to Africa and serve the Lord in poverty. Along the way, while

waiting for a ship in the city of Ostia (near Rome), Monica died. Augustine mourned for a time, and then continued the journey.

Back in Tagaste, he gave his property to the poor. Then, along with Adeodatus, Alypius and some other friends, Augustine devoted himself to prayer, study, and celibacy. Thus began the oldest monastic order in western Europe: the Augustinians. The following year, in 389 A.D., Adeodatus joined Monica in Paradise. Augustine mourned his son for a time, and then turned all his energies to the Church.

In 391 A.D. he became a priest and went to Hippo to help the bishop, Valerius. Augustine's sermons won him a reputation, and the following year he was persuaded to meet the city's Manichean bishop, Fortunatus, in a public debate. Augustine won the debate so decisively that Fortunatus left Hippo and never returned. In 396 A.D., Augustine succeeded Valerius as bishop.

Augustine as Bishop of Hippo. Having vanquished the Manicheans in Hippo, Augustine turned his attention to the Donatists,¹¹ who were actually more numerous than the Catholics in North Africa. Augustine challenged the Donatists to debates, but he was met with rejection, insult, and even violence. The more militant Donatists attacked some of his bishops, and even attempted to kill Augustine himself. This violence led to a hearing before an imperial representative who, after hearing both groups, sided with Augustine and the Catholics. Donatism was outlawed and all Donatist church property was ordered forfeited to the Catholics. The Donatists reacted with more violence, including murder. So Augustine encouraged the imperial officials to enforce the law rigorously, short of death, concluding that in this case the end justified the means.

Nevertheless, Augustine fought most of his battles with words. In this, he was a tireless soldier. He is said to have preached every day, sometimes more than once. He cared for the poor, and left behind an enormous volume of letters and books. When he was not preaching, writing, caring for the poor, or battling the pagans and heretics of his day, Augustine prayed and read. He was consumed by a hunger for God that is reflected in this, his most famous quote:

You have made us, O Lord, for Yourself, and our heart shall find no rest till it rest in You.¹²

Augustine also said, on another occasion: "I desire to know God and the soul. Nothing more? Nothing whatever."¹³

The Philosopher-Theologian. Augustine never lost his devotion to philosophy. He struggled mightily to bring logic and reason to such difficult Church doctrines as the Trinity, or the apparent contradictions between man's free will,

original sin, and God's foreknowledge of the future.¹⁴ Yet he never lost sight of the fact that faith, not reason, is the heart of Christianity: "Seek not to understand that you may believe, but believe that you may understand."¹⁵ He acknowledged that some Scriptures are difficult to fathom, but argued that this is due to our own shortage of wisdom, rather than any defects in the Scriptures themselves. How can a man, who is limited by both time and space, understand God who is limited by neither? Augustine pointed out that the Scriptures must not always be taken literally, for they were meant to convey deep spiritual truths to simple minds. And he insisted that the ultimate arbiter of disputes concerning the meaning of Scriptures was not the individual, but the collective wisdom of Church councils.

Augustine's most famous works were his *Confessions* and the *City of God*. *Confessions* is Augustine's autobiography, which was remarkable in its day for its frankness. *City of God* was, at least in part, a response to pagan accusations that the sacking of Rome by the Goths in 410 A.D. was the result of the Christians' rejection of the old Roman gods. Although Augustine foresaw the ultimate collapse of the Empire, he did not consider it to be the catastrophe that the pagans did. Instead, Augustine argued that God would bring forth from the Empire's destruction something infinitely better.

In *City of God*, Augustine also sought to contrast the life of the faithful (the "City of God") with the life of the unbelievers (the "Earthly City"). While the former was founded upon God and His love, the latter was built upon force, pride, and selfishness. Many of Augustine's readers saw the City of God as the Church, and the Earthly City as the Empire. Yet Augustine himself did not draw such a sharp distinction; he saw that the Empire had elements of both the City of God and the Earthly City—and so did the Church. But Augustine did believe that God would gradually replace the Earthly City—represented by the Empire—with the City of God.

Following the teachings of Paul, Augustine argued capably and forcefully in favor of original sin: that because of Adam's choice to disobey God, we are all separated from God; that we have inherited Adam's selfish, prideful nature, instinctively seeking our own will and our own self-interest instead of God's will; and that because of our bondage to sin we cannot find the freedom to avoid sin without the grace of God. Thus, Augustine disagreed with many in the Eastern Christian Church who believed that man could freely choose not to sin.¹⁶ In Augustine's theology, which reflected the reality of his own life, we are powerless to resist sin through any actions of our own. This view would heavily influence the theology of the Western Church, including both Protestantism and Roman Catholicism.

Augustine also believed in predestination--i.e., that God has chosen in advance whom He will, and will not, save through His grace. Thus, Augustine rejected the

idea that a man has the freedom to accept or reject God, for he asserted that no man could change God's preordained plan for him. In this, he both anticipated and influenced John Calvin, one of the leaders of the Protestant Reformation.

Augustine also impacted many later generations of Christians with his concept of a “just” war. Most Christians during the first three centuries A.D. had refused to serve in the Roman military because of their opposition to war. However, Augustine argued that a war was justifiable if it met certain conditions: (1) it must be waged by the state, whose authority is from God;¹⁷ (2) its purpose must be to punish or resist injustice and to restore peace; and (3) it must be fought without hatred or unnecessary violence, and with inward love.

Despite his extensive reputation, Augustine had a humility and gentleness of spirit that drew men to him and evoked great love and loyalty. We have already observed the frankness and humility in his *Confessions*. Even late in life, he readily acknowledged that he had not yet overcome what he viewed as man's fundamental sin: pride. Finally, note the gentleness—even toward his enemies—in these words to his fellow priests:

Keep this in mind, my brothers; practice it and preach it with meekness that shall never fail. Love the men you fight; kill only their lie. Rest on truth in all humility; defend it but with no cruelty. Pray for those whom you oppose; pray for them while you correct them.¹⁸

Augustine's Death. When the Vandals swept across north Africa, destroying everything, Augustine refused to leave. He encouraged his priests to remain also, to die if necessary with their flocks. He died on August 28, 430, in the third month of the Vandal's siege of Hippo.

One historian has said of Augustine:

No other Christian after Paul was to have so wide, deep, and prolonged an influence upon the Christianity of Western Europe and those forms of the faith that stemmed from it as had Augustine.¹⁹

- Sources:
- (1) *The Early Church*, by W.H.C. Frend (Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1965, 1982).
 - (2) *Saints for Sinners*, by Alban Goodier, S.J. (Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1930, 1993).
 - (3) *The Story of Civilization, Volume 4 (The Age of Faith)*, by Will Durant (Simon and Schuster, New York, 1950).
 - (4) *A History of Christianity, Volume I: Beginnings to 1500*

(Revised Edition), by Kenneth Scott Latourette (Harpers and Row, New York, 1953, 1975).

Endnotes for “St. Augustine”:

¹ All Biblical quotations are from the New American Standard translation.

² Numidia was a Roman province in north Africa, roughly where Algeria now is.

³ One writer of the time called Africa “the cesspool of the world,” and Carthage “the cesspool of Africa.” See Durant, *The Story of Civilization, Vol. 4 (The Age of Faith)*, p. 65, quoting Salvian, and citing McCabe, J., *St. Augustine and His Age* (New York 1903), p. 35.

⁴ Augustine, *Confessions*, ii, 3 (Loeb Library 2V), as quoted in Durant, *The Story of Civilization, Vol. 4 (The Age of Faith)*, p. 65.

⁵ Augustine, *Confessions*, ii, 3 (Loeb Library 2V), as quoted in Durant, *The Story of Civilization, Vol. 4 (The Age of Faith)*, p. 65.

⁶ Cicero was a Roman author who lived, 106 - 43 B.C.

⁷ Manicheism was started a century earlier by a Persian named Mani, who was crucified in about 273 A.D. Mani taught that this world is evil, and that man had been created by Satan, the ruler of this evil world. Mani believed that woman was Satan's crowning achievement, tempting man to sin. Mani taught that he had been sent by the True God to teach man how to overcome his own evil nature, through reason, intelligence, celibacy, vegetarianism, and asceticism. In some parts of the Roman Empire, such as Augustine's Africa, Manicheism masqueraded as a form of Christianity.

⁸ Ambrose lived from 339 to 397 A.D. He became Bishop of Milan in 373 A.D., and held the post until his death.

⁹ Romans 13:13-14

¹⁰ See Goodier, *Saints for Sinners*, p. 24.

¹¹ Donatism began shortly after the end of the Great Persecution. During the Persecution, many church leaders had slavishly complied with the State's demand to turn over Scriptures for destruction. As soon as the Persecution ended, Donatus, Bishop of Carthage, demanded that the Church remove the bishops who had betrayed the Church in this manner. Donatus also insisted that any sacraments performed by such leaders—for example, baptisms, ordinations, and communion—were invalid. The Church as a whole rejected the Donatist position. Many fallen priests and bishops were allowed to repent, do penance, and retain their positions. The Church also held that the sacraments are valid without regard to the moral character of the priest or bishop who

administers them. So the Donatists set up rival churches, with rival bishops, throughout northern Africa. A Church council denounced the Donatist position in 314 A.D.

¹² See Goodier, *Saints for Sinners*, p. 28. See also Durant, *The Story of Civilization, Vol. 4 (The Age of Faith)*, p. 71, which identifies this sentence as the opening line of Augustine's *Confessions*.

¹³ See Durant, *The Story of Civilization, Vol. 4 (The Age of Faith)*, p. 70 (citing "Solil. i, 7")

¹⁴ Original sin teaches that man is sinful from birth and therefore cannot freely choose to refrain from sin. In other words, a person will naturally and inevitably sin, because sin is part of every person's nature. We sin, just as a lion hunts or a bee stings. In this way, original sin negates a person's free will to choose to behave righteously. This was the source of the controversy between Pelagius and Augustine, which is discussed in footnote 16, below.

The idea of "the foreknowledge of God" says that God, because He is outside of time, knows both past and future, and therefore knows who will ultimately be saved and who will not. But if the future is known and unalterable, what happens to a person's free will to choose to follow Jesus Christ and to repent? Augustine eventually abandoned the concept of free will.

¹⁵ See Durant, *The Story of Civilization, Vol. 4 (The Age of Faith)*, p. 70 (citing "Comment. in Joan. Evang., xxix, 6; Sermon 43")

¹⁶ The most extreme expression of this view is called Pelagianism, named after a British monk named Pelagius, who was a contemporary of Augustine. Pelagius rejected original sin, claiming that the sin of Adam and Eve tainted only their own lives and not that of their descendants. Thus, Pelagius argued, all humans are capable of living sinless lives. Since Pelagians rejected original sin, they generally believed that newborn babies were sinless. Thus, some rejected infant baptism, believing that there was no sin yet that needed washing away. Some Pelagians asserted not only that men are capable of living sinless lives, but that some have actually done so, both before and after Christ. A modified form of Pelagianism was advocated by two monks, John Cassian and Vincent (early 5th century A.D.), who declared that God wants to save all people and that He will strengthen even our slightest inclination to do good. Thus, Cassian and Vincent, while rejecting the Pelagian concept that men can live sinless lives on their own, believed that men are capable of wanting to do good, and that God will then help them do it.

Pelagianism was eventually condemned as heretical by both the eastern and western branches of the Church. A Church synod (council) in 529 A.D., called the Synod of Orange (or the Council of Orange), affirmed the concept of original sin and declared that man can turn to God only through God's grace. However, the synod also rejected Augustine's view that some are predestined to be condemned. Indeed, the Synod held that all who are baptized are capable of achieving salvation "if they labor faithfully."

¹⁷ See, for example, Romans 13:1-4:

Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no

authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil.

¹⁸ See Goodier, *Saints for Sinners*, p. 24.

¹⁹ Latourette, *A History of Christianity, Vol. I*, p. 97