



## FOUNDATIONS THE LIFE, TIMES, & THEOLOGY OF THE EARLY CHURCH

### Augustine of Hippo, 354 – 430 A.D.

To study and explore the life and writings of St. Augustine is to delve into the deep waters of one of the brightest and most influential Christians of all time. His life is well known to us, a life marked by a deep humanity and powerful faith, and his writings were and are unique, potent, and influential. Although oft ignored because of their implications, Augustine's work was instrumental in sparking and forming the Reformation, over 1,000 years after he died.

#### The Life of Augustine

- Aurelius Augustinus was born on November 13<sup>th</sup>, 354 AD in Tagaste, Numidia (present Souk Ahras, Algeria). He was the son of lower-middle class parents, Patrick and Monica, had two brothers and a sister. Patrick was a pagan and a minor Roman official, who only converted shortly before his death in 370. Monica was a Christian Berber of North Africa, and a devout follower of Jesus. Monica's influence on her son is undeniable and her involvement in his life is significant. Augustine's intellect was recognized early, and he was given a fine education in Carthage, paid for by a wealthy patron.
- During his studies in Carthage (c. 371), he fully availed himself of the revels such a city offered, eventually taking for himself a concubine who bore him a son, whom he named Adeodatus. Augustine greatly desired to pursue a public career as a statesman, and his studies in rhetoric required him to read Cicero, the great classical Roman statesman and philosopher. From Cicero Augustine learned that eloquence is not enough on its own, one must seek and possess truth. His love for rhetoric gave him a dislike for the 'crudeness' of the Bible. Thus began a long and arduous search by the young Augustine for truth, and his struggle to understand God, good, and evil.
- His search initially led him to Manichaeism, a Persian religion founded by a teacher named Mani in the third century. Mani taught that the human condition is the result of two opposing elements, light and dark, within us. Light = spirit; dark = matter (very platonic!). Salvation thus consisted of a person separating their 'light' from the material word and be re-absorbed by the great light.
- Began teaching in 374 in his hometown of Tagaste, his Manichaeism greatly shocking his mother Monica. Two years later started teaching in Carthage but found his students rude and unruly. Took a more promising teaching post in Rome itself in 383. However, Rome was full of cheating students who skipped out on paying him, and within a year he caught a break with yet another promising post in Milan, which is a major turning point.
- He officially abandoned Manichaeism, and for a short time embraced Neo-Platonism. Monica joins him in Milan and convinces him to go and listen to the local bishop, Ambrose. Augustine's life would never be the same.
- Ambrose of Milan – the first great prince bishop. The son of the governor of Gaul, Ambrose himself was the governor of northern Italy. When the Bishop of Milan died, there was a ruckus between Arians and Christians over who should be the next Bishop. Ambrose, as a mindful governor, thought it his duty to attend the election and ensure the peace be held. He ended up getting himself elected as Bishop! Not only was he not ordained, he wasn't even baptized, only a catechumen! He was promptly baptized, went through the ordination process in 8 days, ordained a presbyter, and consecrated bishop a week later.
- Ambrose was the first great Christian mind Augustine was to encounter. However, one final obstacle remained to his full conversion, namely his sexual appetites and his career as a statesman. Were he to accept his mother's faith, it would have to be 'all in', not lukewarm.

## Rector's Forum @ St. George

- 385, a personal crisis arose regarding marriage. "Give me chastity, and give me constancy, but give it not yet", for he refused celibacy during the separation and found another lover (Confessions, VI,15).
- The summer of 386, his crisis reached a climax outside of Milan, and having heard of a number of Roman philosopher's who had converted to Christianity after reading Athanasius' *The Life of St. Anthony*, Augustine fled into the garden and there wept in anguish. Suddenly, from nearby, he heard a child's voice singing, "Take and read, take and read." Lying next to him was a copy of St. Paul's letter to the Romans, and opening it up and reading the first passage he came upon, Romans 13, and read, "Not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy; but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires." He writes, "No sooner has I reached the end of the verse than the light of certainly flooded my heart and all dark shades of doubt fled away (VIII, 29).
- Augustine was baptized shortly thereafter, resigned his teaching post, and with his son, brother, and mother, departed Milan to return to Africa. In 387, while in the port of Ostia, Monica fell sick and died. In 390 settled in Cassiciacum with his son, Adeodatus, who also died shortly thereafter.
- In Cassiciacum he and some friends founded a small community of devotion, study, and pray – although nothing like a rigorous monastic community. It was here that Augustine wrote his first Christians works, and began slowly moving away from his neoplatonism.
- Ordination: a year later while visiting the nearby city of Hippo, he was besieged by the local congregation and their bishop, Valerius, to be ordained. He was ordained on the spot, and soon was Augustine elected as co-bishop and shortly after Augustine was Bishop of Hippo, which he remained until his death some forty years later.
- Initially he wrote strongly against the Manicheans, which by now he had long left behind. During his episcopate another significant issue arose surrounding the idea of the pure church, what came to be known as Donatism. Finally, Augustine is perhaps best known for his refutation of the teaching of Pelagius (more on these below), which centered on questions of free will, grace, and divine election.
- Augustine's greatest and most well known works are his *Confession*, *The City of God*, and *The Spirit and the Letter* (which is the second in his three part work against Pelagius called, "The Merits and Forgiveness of Sin").
- Augustine served faithfully as Bishop of Hippo until the summer of 430 when he became seriously ill. At the same time, the armies of the Gothic Vandals, which had been sweeping across North Africa from Spain, were besieging Hippo. Augustine died, in solitude and in peace before the Vandals broke through the city walls, on August 28<sup>th</sup>, 430.

## The Times of Augustine

- The Roman Empire in the west was entering its final season, slowly but steadily crumbling from internal strife and external invasion. During a period of 50 years (from 235 to 284) there were 23 emperors! Stability was regained by Diocletian in 285, but translated in to Christian persecution
- The Great Persecution: severe, empire-wide persecution under Emperor Diocletian. The 300s were the most theologically tumultuous century of the Christian era until the Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> c.
- Constantine: In 305 wins Battle of the Milvian Bridge, using the sign of the chi-rho cross on the shields of his soldiers. In 313 he issues the Edict of Milan, effectively making Christianity legal Two side effects were monasticism and Donatism, reacting to state control of the church
- Arian controversy/heresy: Arius was a presbyter from Alexandria in the late 200s, who taught that the divine Logos, who ultimately became incarnate as Jesus Christ, was created by God the Father – "there was a time when He was not". The Word (Logos) was therefore not coeternal with God (the Father) but the first and most supreme of all created beings. Arius clashed with Bishop Alexander, who eventually had Arius' teachings condemned and removed him from office. Arius, did not agree, and used his popularity and giftedness to push back against Alexander, and the conflict quickly spread throughout the whole Church.

## Rector's Forum @ St. George

- Council of Nicaea in 325. This was the First Ecumenical Council, which produced the first NT canon the Nicene Creed we say to this day. The council overwhelmingly rejected but the matter of the divinity and humanity of Christ would not fully be settled until Chalcedon in 451.
- Augustine had to address Donatism and Pelagianism as well as Trinitarian issues.
- Pelagius was a British monk who was well known for his upstanding moral character, disciplined life, and excellent speaking ability. He also comes across the writings of Augustine on the nature of sin and how salvation is truly the work of God's grace alone and not the product of our free will. Pelagius sets about to 'correct' Augustine and assert that humans stand condemned before God only when they choose to disobey like Adam, but may stand reconciled when they choose to follow Christ.

## The Theology of Augustine

- What makes Augustine's writings so remarkable, is how much they flow from his own personal life and struggles. He was a great pastor-theologian with superb academic credentials and well acquainted with the slings and arrows and sorrows of life. More than most other early Fathers, we know a lot about his life story.
- *The City of God* – written sometime between 412 and 426, is a response to the pagan critique that the fall of Rome in 410 was the fault of Christianity. Rome fell because the pagan gods, who were abandoned in favor of Christ, were exacting their revenge. Augustine begins by pointing out the Rome was well acquainted with calamity long before Christianity came along. He then goes on to describe the world in terms of the City of Man and the City of God. The former is temporary, but necessary for the ordering of human life under God, the latter is the eternal dwelling of the redeemed, who carry dual citizenship but for whom the City of God is ultimately home.
- *The Spirit and the Letter*, written against Pelagius' teachings, is a treatise on the nature of fallen humanity and the grace of God to initiate, establish, and fulfill the redemption of sinners by his own good will and purposes. Augustine's teachings on human sin and divine grace were not widely accepted, and in fact Pelagius' teachings had a much better reception. However, as time and the controversy wore on, the correctness of Augustine's position was clear, and in 529 the Second Council of Orange ratified a series of Canons which uphold the Augustinian view of human nature.
- *The Confessions* – written in 397 at age 43 and while he was Bishop of Hippo, they are one of the most remarkable literary works in history. While many writers before him had published memoirs and what we would call autobiographies, none were close to the undertaking of the Confession. More than just narrative, it is a personal journey of reflection on both life and faith. He shies away from nothing, glosses over nothing. No sin was too debauched for him to omit, no sorrow or guilt too harrowing to skip over. But it is nevertheless a theological work, and to see it simply as autobiography with intermittent theological 'reflections' is a serious injustice. See Hampl's preface, *xvi*.
- The work consists of thirteen Books. Books I through IX chronicle his life, from childhood through adolescence, adulthood, tragedy, struggle, conversion, and ordination. Books X through XIII are theological treatises: Book X on the nature of memory, Books XI through XIII are treatise on time, eternity, heaven and earth, based on Genesis. These last four Books make it clear that his overall purpose transcends mere autobiography, but rather through plumbing his own memory and life, intensely seeks to understand God, who created him, his life, and all of the world.
- It is significant to note that he lived another 33 years after writing the Confessions, during which time he wrote extensively and produced treatises like *The City of God*, which can still be bought in paperback today. When he got towards the end of his life, he went back through his many writings and re-edited and/or remarking on them. When he got to *The Confessions*, he changed nothing.