

Augustine of Hippo: Triumph of Sovereign Grace

Uptown Church Sunday School

August 9, 2009

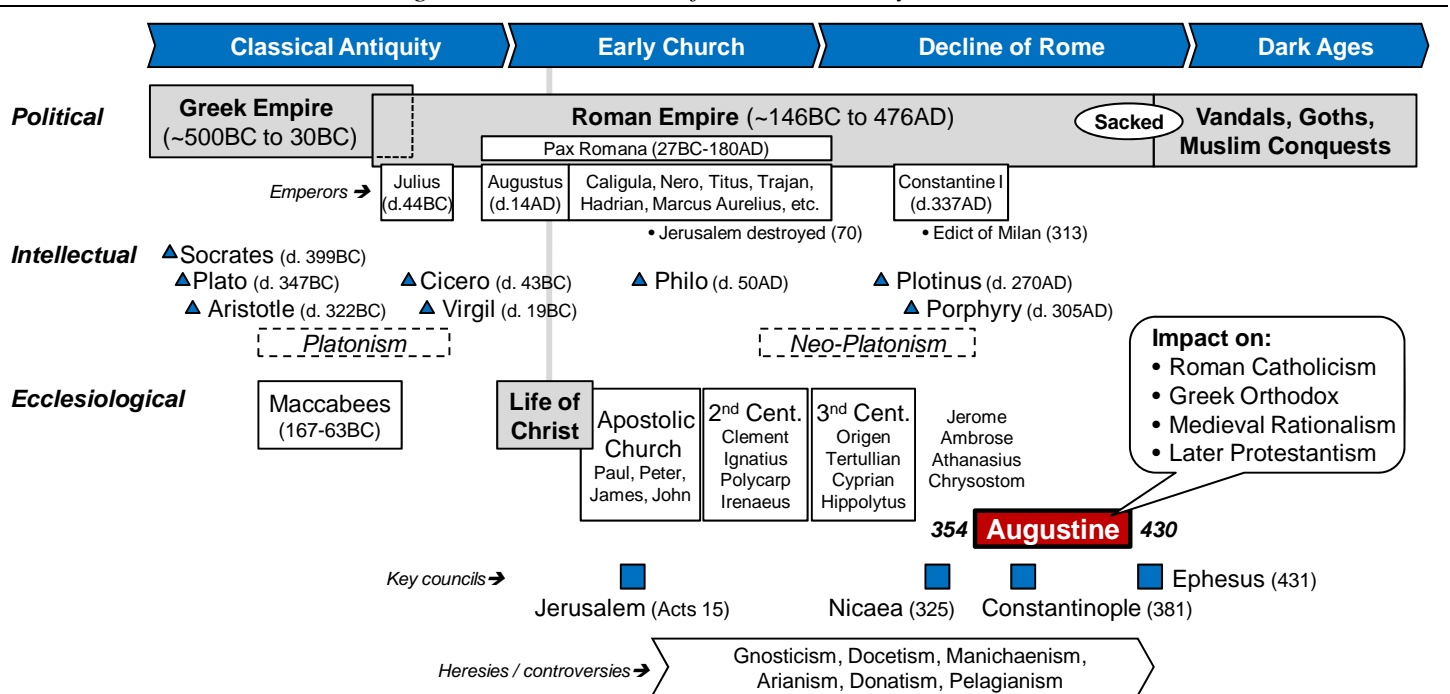
“Give me the grace to do as you command, and command me to do what you will.”
 “It is Augustine who gave us the Reformation.”

Introduction

- Studying Augustine is like trying to take a day-hike up Denali – his influence, writings, and insight are simply staggering. Where does one even begin?
- Warfield wrote that Augustine “determined the course of [the Church’s] history in the West up to the present day.”
 - The Reformation was, at its core, largely a rediscovery of Augustine, whom Calvin considered his “spiritual father” and whom Luther recapitulated in his defense of justification by faith. Augustine “gave us the Reformation.”
- Adolf Harnack (German theologian) wrote, “Augustine was the greatest man the church has possessed between Paul the Apostle and Luther the Reformer.”
- However, I tend to agree with *Christian History* magazine in saying, “After Jesus and Paul, Augustine of Hippo is the most influential figure in the history of Christianity.”
- Augustine was a philosopher, poet, theologian, mystic, pastor, and profligate-turned-celibate: eminently relatable for his struggles...only with a thousand times the wisdom.
- **Prayer**

Historical context: dramatic shift in Western history

Figure 1: Crossroads of Church History in the West



- *Q: When you hear the name Augustine, what thoughts or ideas come to mind?*
- After several centuries of seemingly impenetrable worldwide prowess and stability, the Roman Empire was fast approaching its demise – Goths and Vandals attacking.
 - After Diocletian persecution, Constantine I, the first Christianized Roman emperor, decreed religious tolerance in the Edict of Milan, legitimizing Christianity and establishing Roman Catholicism as the dominant religion.
- Neo-Platonism, sparked by a rediscovery of classical Greek and Roman philosophers by Plotinus in the mid 200s, was producing a philosophical environment that was both in conflict with and conducive to theological development among the church fathers.
- Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople had squashed early heresies (namely Arianism) and set a pattern for ecumenical decisions on doctrine.
 - Several heresies/controversies had been gaining momentum throughout the first 3 centuries of the church, causing fragmentation (RCC, Eastern Orthodox, etc.).
- As John Piper wrote, “Augustine lived in one of those tumultuous times between the shifting of whole civilizations.”
- In an amazing and paradoxical way, Augustine was a fountainhead that influenced...
 - Roman Catholic Church (“Latin Church Father,” ecclesiology, monasticism)
 - Protestantism (sovereignty of God, original sin, trinity, predestination, grace)
 - Eastern Orthodox (revered as a saint, though some considered him heretical)
 - Medieval Rationalism / Scholasticism (faith and reason, Lombard)
 - Mysticism (self-renunciation, asceticism, philosophical frameworks)
 - Enlightenment (scorned his views of original sin, Humanists)

Overview of Augustine’s Life

Early life; slavery to sin and empty words

- Thagaste in 354AD: 300 yr old city; was once “resplendent” and a major granary for the empire. Twilight of Rome: laziness, heavy taxation, military cruelty, inflation, consolidation of wealth. N. Africa looked down upon.
- Parentage: Patricius and Monica
 - Patricius was middle-class farmer. Not a believer. Solely focused on providing son with a Roman education.
 - “Saw in me only hollow things”
 - Monica was a devout Roman Catholic and would be a dominant force (prayer and otherwise) in Augustine’s life.
 - Likely had 1 brother and 2 sisters.
- Education in Thagaste and Carthage
 - *Q: What did Roman education emphasize in this period?*

Figure 2: Timeline of Augustine’s Life

354AD	Birth in Thagaste
371	Goes to Carthage
372	Death of father; takes concubine (15 yrs)
373	Birth of son, Adeodatus
384	Begins professorship in Milan
386	Conversion
387	Death of mother, Monica
388	Returns to Thagaste
391	Ordained priest in Hippo
395	Consecrated Bishop of Hippo
398-99	Writes <i>Confessiones</i>
399	Writes <i>De Trinitate</i>
410	Involved in Pelagian controversy (multiple yrs) Visigoths sack Rome
413	Writes <i>City of God</i>
421	Writes <i>Enchiridion</i>
430	Death in Hippo; Vandals attack North Africa
455AD	Vandals sack Rome; precipitates end of western Roman Empire

- Roman education at this point purely focused on producing rhetoricians, skilled in Latin wordplay. Heavy emphasis on memorization, especially of Virgil and Cicero. Augustine developed desire to become a schoolmaster and an expert orator. Taught to love form, not substance. “Fertile tongue.”
- Never learned Greek – he was the only significant philosopher not to do so.
- Benefits: trained him to be a perfectionist and logician; later in life would quote scripture 42,000 in his writings, mostly from memory.
- Descent into carnal sin by age 17
 - Carthage was the preeminent city of North Africa and rivaled Rome in influence.
 - “I found myself in the midst of a hissing cauldron of lust...I was inflamed with desire for a surfeit of hell’s pleasures.”
 - *Q: What did Augustine do at Carthage? What is notable about her?*
 - Augustine took a concubine at 17 – he would live with her for 15 years until just before his conversion. Fairly typical for Roman gentry. Compared to his friends, Augustine was remarkably monogamous and may have actually loved her. However, he would reflect that he treated her purely in a carnal way. He never mentioned her name in any writings! She bore him a son, Adeodatus, whom he loved dearly but whom died in adolescence.
 - Pear incident: along with friends, Augustine stole pears from a neighbor – not to eat, but purely to do it. This seemingly trivial childhood incident was formative for his views on original sin and the bondage of the will.

Searching for truth

- Cicero’s *Hortensius*: awakening to substance over words
 - Augustine read this book (no longer extant) at age 19, and he was shocked for the first time by the appeal of wisdom and reason, versus the oratory he was taught.
 - “This book, indeed, changed all my way of feeling...Suddenly, all my empty hope for my career lost its appeal; and I was left with an unbelievable fire in my heart, desiring the deathless qualities of wisdom.”
- Early experimentation with but ultimate dislike for the old Latin Bible
 - Not polished enough for his tastes. However, it was common for philosophers to refer to scripture among other things as possible sources of wisdom.
- Falling into Manichaeism: 9 years of emptiness
 - *Q: Anyone familiar with Manichaeism?*
 - Gnostic religion founded by Persian “prophet” Mani in the mid 200s AD
 - Bizarre theosophy whose key tenets were a dualistic battle between good and evil forces, sinfulness of physical bodies, deprecation of OT, usage of parts of Paul and other religious writings, asceticism, and a small group of “elect”
 - Augustine was initially thoroughly convinced – spent his time attacking Christians and debating esoteric teachings of Mani
 - Manichaeism was condemned by the RCC (Monica kicked Augustine out of the house when he returned to Thagaste)
 - Ultimately rejected it as hollow and deceptive after debating Faustus
 - For many years after his true conversion, his opponents suspected he still had Manichaean leanings until he wrote convincingly against the sect
- Pursuing truth in astrology and the physical sciences
- First job teaching in Carthage; then a brief teaching post in Rome

- Professor of Rhetoric in Milan (384)
 - Providential event: Symmachus (prefect of Rome) hoped Augustine would openly conflict with Ambrose in Milan, with whom he had public dispute.
- *Q: To summarize, what two themes stand out about Augustine's life thus far? Carnal sin and despair to find "true truth"*

"Conversion" to Philosophy (Neo-Platonism)

- Step 1: Surrounded by friends who collectively discovered Plotinus and Porphyry
 - The key figures in the mid-200s revival of Platonic philosophy
 - Key distinctive: view of one divine being from which all spiritual and physical life is derived. This cured Augustine of his Manichaean view that God = man.
 - Many RCC Christians at the time were closet Neo-Platonists
 - In a few months, Augustine became a better Platonist than most ancient Greeks
 - "I realized that, above my own mind, which was liable to change, there was the never-changing true eternity of truth...In an instant of awe, my mind attained to the sight of the God who is."
- Step 2: Encounter with Ambrose, Bishop of Milan
 - Heard him preach and met him in 386. Overwhelmed at the depth of his insight.
 - Ambrose was taught by Simplicianus, who was friends with Victorinus, who translated Plotinus to Latin. Thus, he was well-versed in Greek philosophy – rejected all of it as "ripping off the Hebrew prophets."
 - Ambrose's elegant, well-reasoned defense of OT and NT attracted Augustine and pricked his heart as to the use of scriptural authority in finding truth
- Continued enslavement to sexual sin, but desire for continence
 - Monica convinces him to send concubine home and pursue a legitimate wife; instead he took another concubine

Conversion to Christ in August 386

- Garden event
 - Began reading less of Plotinus and more of Paul
 - *Q: Anyone familiar with the story of how his conversion came about?*
 - State of turmoil one afternoon in a friend's garden – heard a child's voice saying "Take up and read, take up and read."
 - "In my misery, I kept crying, 'How long shall I go on saying tomorrow, tomorrow?' Why not now? Why not make an end of my ugly sins at this moment?"
 - Inside, he picked up a manuscript of Romans and read 13:13 – "Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy."
 - "I had no wish to read more and no need to do so. For in an instant, as I came to the end of the sentence, it was as though the light of confidence flooded into my heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled...You converted me to yourself."
- Rejection of secular life: immediately decided to leave teaching post & reject marriage
- Baptized by Ambrose as a *competente* (adult catechism student) in 387
 - Mother Monica died in Ostia
- "Retirement" to a contemplative life in Cassiciacum and Thagaste
 - Forms a group of *servi dei* with friends to spend their time in the classical posture of philosophical discussion – focused on Christianity – and quasi-monasticism

○ “I am just the sort of man who is impatient in his longing not only to take what is true on faith, but to come to understand it.”

- *Q: How does Augustine’s journey through sin and philosophical despair make his conversion event all the more compelling? Impact on his later doctrine of grace?*

Forty-year Public Ministry in Hippo Regius

- Conscripted as a priest and, thereafter, bishop in Hippo
 - Tried to avoid cities that had vacancies – friend Alypius conscripted in Thagaste.
 - Visited Hippo in 391. Against his will, he was nominated priest. Bishop Valerius recognizes his oratorical skills and insight (already) and allowed him to preach.
 - Establishes a monastery/seminary in Hippo near the church. Trains many men who would later hold church leadership positions throughout Africa. Beginning of his vast impact on Christendom.
 - Ordained as Valerius’ successor in short order, amid little controversy
 - In a sermon later on: “What I could have been, I wished not to be: nor did I seek to be what I am now. For I chose to be humble in the house of my God ... I was grabbed. I was made a priest...and from there I became your bishop.”
- Rapid rise to prominence within the North African church
 - By 395, he was an influential figure at the first African Council at Carthage
- Death to the ideal of the “quiet life”: ordinary life of a bishop
 - Roman Catholic bishops in the period were partly government figures and would adjudicate court cases among their congregants, settle disputes, visit prisoners
 - Augustine despised the “odious task” but was a remarkably good pastor.
 - “...Make us fritter away time we could devote to providing divine things”
 - Biggest struggle was the loss of relationships with friends.
- Wrote *Confessions*
 - Notable for its innovation as an autobiography that penetrated the emotions, sins, and “then and now” of his life (at that point, he was a major public figure)
- Donatist controversy
 - Major schism in the Catholic Church had been underway prior to his rise to power
 - Led by Donatus Magnus; resulted from the aftermath of the Diocletian persecution. Believed they were the only “pure” church and that mainstream RCC had gone astray and could not properly administer the sacraments.
 - Augustine campaigned vehemently against them and won the upper hand in N. Africa. This was his second major victory against heretical movements (first was Manichaeism).
- Pelagian controversy
 - *Q: Anyone want to provide a brief synopsis of what Pelagius taught?*
 - Key teachings of Pelagius, a British monk:
 - Man was not fallen and could become sinless through exerting his will.
 - Scorned view that grace was necessary to perform what God commands.
 - Believed that moral responsibility implies moral ability.
 - Grace was helpful but not necessary to achieve justification before God.
 - His teachings had thrown the church into turmoil.
 - Augustine spent a significant portion of his later life writing against Pelagius (who, ironically, had leveraged Augustine’s, *De Libero Arbitrio*).

- Harnack: “There has never, perhaps, been another crisis of equal importance in church history in which the opponents have expressed the principles so clearly. The Arian dispute [on the divinity of Christ] before the Nicene Council can alone be compared with it.”
- Augustine’s teachings:
 - Man is fallen in Adam.
 - Man still a free moral agent but will / nature completely enslaved to sin.
 - Sovereign grace required to be reconciled to God: regeneration.
 - “Those receiving mercy can only be grateful for grace they had done nothing to deserve...I had previously tried hard to uphold the freedom of choice of the human will; but the Grace of God had the upper hand.”
- His assertion of the Pauline doctrine of justification by grace through faith was his chief life victory.
 - Augustinian view of man’s fallenness (*massa peccati*) shaped all of Western theology and philosophy until the Enlightenment.
 - Pelagius was condemned as a heretic at the Council of Ephesus.
- *Q: What did the Augustine vs. Pelagian dispute foreshadow? Calvin v. Arminius*
- *Q: Would you agree with RC Sproul’s comment that “subsequent generations gave the nod to Erasmus [a Pelagian]...and the modern church is held captive by [Pelagianism]?”*
- Warfield on Calvin: “Augustine had taught all this a thousand years before him.”
- Initial sack of Rome – wrote of *City of God*
 - North African Christians were largely premillennialists and saw huge eschatological ramifications of the attack on Rome.
 - Augustine wrote this magnum opus as a reflection on the events and a statement of his view of the city of man, the role of the magistrate, just war, etc.
- Death in Hippo at the onset of the Vandal invasion
 - He left nothing behind but clothing and books.
- *Q: How was Augustine’s life an illustration of the triumph of sovereign grace?*

Personal legacy

- Personality:
 - Sarcastic (to a fault)
 - Independent minded and excellent thinker – able to penetrate arguments
 - Massive library (for his day) – know how to use books
 - Always learning: “wrote as he evolved and evolved as he wrote”
 - Loved gardening, hated travelling, disliked winter, and was skeptical of music
 - Chief flaw was his desire for praise from men, protection of his reputation
- His vast writings include many things we might disagree with, including...
 - Sinlessness of Mary
 - Purging of sins / remediation (pre-purgatory doctrine)
 - Ecclesiology and role of pope and bishop
 - Level of criticality of means of grace / sacraments administered by the church
- *Q: What can we learn from Augustine’s life – past sins, intellectual journey, perceived inadequacy to lead the church – about how God uses broken vessels?*

Impact on Reformed theology: long-term legacy

- Augustine’s writings were his chief contribution to the West. He wrote perhaps more than any other ancient philosopher or Christian church father.
- His theology changed as he matured, which often introduces confusion if you read his old works. He also was firmly Roman Catholic at a time when their doctrine was not solidified.
- Calvin, Luther, Zwingli, Bucer all drew from Augustine. The Reformation was, as Sproul put it, the triumph of Augustinianism over Pelagianism.
- The following table illustrates a handful of his key teachings from Scripture and how they impacted Reformed theology to the present day.

	Pagan philosophical root	Augustinian view	Reformed doctrines
	<i>Teachings that Augustine learned from or rejected</i>	<i>Augustine’s core teachings</i>	<i>Impact on Reformed Theology (Calvinism, Westminster, etc.)</i>
<i>Nature of man & grace</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plotinus: man by will and reason can “ascend” to the Godhead • Manichees: flesh is evil 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Man is fallen in Adam and in a state of utter sinfulness and inability • “Vitiating will” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Original sin / total depravity • Necessity of regeneration • <i>Sola fide, sola gratia</i>
<i>Sovereignty of God</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Platonists / Pelagianism: salvation based on merit (foreseen or otherwise) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sovereign will of God in salvation • First Cause and Second Causes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Predestination • Unconditional election
<i>Trinity</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plotinus: “god-force” existing in three forms (One, Spirit, Soul) • Manichee: pantheism / God in man • Arius: Christ < God the Father 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unapproachableness of the Deity • Sovereignty of God • Assertion of the Trinity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creator / creature distinction • Doctrine of God (attributes, trinity) • Divinity of Christ
<i>Providence</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aristotle: gods’ will underlies the actions / will of men 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tension between God’s immutable will and man’s moral agency • Efficacy of prayer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providence (WSC: “preserving and governing all his creatures and all their actions”)
<i>Revelation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plato and Aristotle: darkness of man vs. light of wisdom (Plato’s cave) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exegesis of John 1 / “logos” – word made flesh 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Special and general revelation
<i>Reason</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plotinus: salvation found in abstract reason • Manichees: Gnostic knowledge of God 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Faith and reason go hand in hand • Importance and validity of <i>authority</i> in defining absolute truth 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Sola scriptura</i> • Perspicuity of scripture (necessary truth contained in or rightly deduced from...)
<i>Redemption</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Neo-Platonists: world-cycles, reincarnation / transmigration of souls 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One redemptive plan of God executed in the death and resurrection of Christ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Historia salutis</i> • Reformed eschatology
<i>Eternity</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aristotelian view of time as a physical constraint imposed on physical world 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • God imposed time on creation • God is outside and above time – eternal and unchanging 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Infinity and omniscience of God • Not divine foreknowledge but divine decree from before all time

Abbreviated List of Sources

Augustine. *Confessions*

Brown, Peter. *Augustine of Hippo*

Chadwick, Henry. *Augustine*

Piper, John. *The Swan is Not Silent*

Sproul, RC. *Augustine and Pelagius*

Warfield, BB *Augustine and Calvin*

