

St. augustine of hippo: a biographical essay



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Introduction

The historic Church is often defined by its response in a time of a major crisis in doctrine, theology, or overall general trajectory. From the fourth century in regard to Egyptian Bishop Athanasius advocating for a biblical view of the Trinity, causing him to be exiled from Alexandria over five times to the debate of the hypostatic union (deity and humanity) of Christ, how the Church responded in times of crisis still has an effect on the Church today. Augustine of Hippo, church father, theologian, and bishop made his mark on Church history by stepping into one of these historic crossroads. Gonzalez discusses Augustine's unique place in history by stating,

Augustine is the end of one era as well as the beginning of another. He is the last of the ancient Christian writers and the forerunner of medieval theology. The main currents of ancient theology converged in him, and from him flow the rivers, not only of medieval scholasticism, but also of sixteenth-century Protestant theology.[1]

The key element that allowed Augustine to make his mark during this time of strife in the Church was his ability to articulate theological ideas much more eloquently and clearly than any others. However, Augustine also presented ideas that were divisive in the Church as well regardless of how clearly, he stated his ideas which were displayed in his books such as *Confessions* and about 245 penned letters. Through these writings and various historical records, Augustine of Hippo made a major impact on the historical Church, especially the Western Church. In this biographical essay, I will explore the life and ministry of Augustine of Hippo by discussing aspects such as his

childhood and education, external influences, writings, theology, and major contributions and legacy to the church.

Childhood and Education

Augustine's early life is best known of all the Church fathers due to the writing of the first ever autobiography, *Confessions*. In this autobiography, Augustine reveals details of his childhood, family, youth, and even intimate details about sins from his younger life. Augustine was born on November 13th, 354 in Tripoli, a small city in the province of Numidia. Augustine's father, Patrick, was a man of the community who sat on the town council among other civil duties while his religious mother, Monnica, was known for giving to the poor, attending prayer daily, and honoring martyrs. In *Confessions*, Augustine credits his mother for bringing him to faith through constant prayers and encouragement. Patrick was a pagan man who had little interest in faith despite Monnica's attempts to convert him, nonetheless, when Augustine was 16, Patrick was baptized just before his death.

In terms of education, Augustine's parents arranged to send him to special schools because of his budding promise as a student despite the high cost of education. He was formally educated at Thasgate, Maduara, and Carthage as a rhetorician as it was one of the few occupations that allowed for social upward mobility. After his father's death, Augustine followed a path that strayed from his Christian mother's upbringing during his time in higher education. Augustine vividly describes in *Confessions* how " he stole pearls from a nearby orchard not out of any wish for the fruit, which was of inferior quality, but because there is a pleasure in doing something forbidden. As he

looked back on the incident, he felt himself to be repeating the experience of Adam in Genesis.”[2]This pattern of pleasure in the forbidden came to fruition, especially as a student in Carthage where he walked the line of fulfilling lustful desires with studying religion. He records a prayer in *Confessions* that states , “ Grant me chastity Lord, but not yet”[3]in which the inner struggle of his lustful temptations was recorded. At age 17, this pattern ended in the relationship with a woman of servant status. Augustine describes the relationship as just a fulfillment for sex and even says, “ Under the sway of passion man is as uncontrollable as a flash flood or hot wax.”[4]

This inner struggle characterized his reason for a delaying of baptism and conversion. In *Confessions* , he describes the incident of an angel voice telling him to pick up the Bible and read it which caused him to first read Romans 13: 3 where Paul urges those to give up their drunken, sinful desires. He later writes, “ I had no wish to read further, and no need. For in that instant, with the very ending of the sentence, it was as though a light of utter confidence shone in all my heart, and all the darkness of uncertainty vanished away.”[5]At that moment, Augustine converted to Christianity. Soon after his baptism, Monica died which drove him to deep mourning to pursue a monastic life in North Africa.

External Influences

While studying in Carthage, Augustine came under the influence of a cult known as Manichaeism. For Augustine, Manichaeism offered answers to important questions in life that all people must deal with. One important question that Manichaeans seemed to have solved was the question of evil

similarly to the Gnostics. According to Chadwick, “ The principle and source of evil is called Hylé, the Greek word for matter; but Mani’s god of light is not actually non-physical; he is a vital presence permeating plant and animal life”[6]Therefore, the explanation of evil is based on two pre-existing, equally powerful forces of light and darkness. This belief system contrasted Christianity because it was based on logic and reason instead of mere faith which interested Augustine and he quickly became a “ hearer” of the cult. However, Augustine questioned the strength of their logic as it did not fare well against the natural science trends of the times which caused him to leave from North Africa for Rome and Milan and validate the dissipation of his belief in Manichaeans.

While studying in Milan, there were two major external influences that encountered Augustine. The first major external influence that encountered Augustine was his increased reading of Neo-Platonism. Neoplatonism is a set of philosophers who deemed it necessary to improve the writings of Plato. For Neo-Platonics, the key element is the teaching of Plato between the world of the material and the world of knowledge. The physical world is corrupt while the world of forms is perfect. Thus, “ real knowledge is to be found in the contemplation of the forms, the true causes of the appearances.”[7]For Augustine, a major question that he wrestled with was, “ If God is good, then why is there so much evil in the world? Did God create evil?” The Neo-Platonic answer to this question drew him to their writings. For the Neo-Platonic, evil is not a substance, but rather is simply the absence of good. Essentially, Neo-Platonics hold that “ the discomforts, inconveniences, and even dis-asters of human life are either the

consequences of our mistaken choices or providence's painful way of reminding us that this material earth is not the realm of our ultimate destiny.”[8]This resonated deeply with Augustine because one major objection to Manichaean thought was that crediting evil to Satan removed human responsibility. Once Augustine grasped that Neoplatonism contained an answer to this burning question on the subject of evil, he committed himself to Neoplatonism.

The second influence was northern Italy's greatest bishop, Ambrose. Ambrose embodied everything that challenged Augustine's perspective of Christianity. For Augustine, Christianity was a religion for weak people of inferior intellect, but Ambrose convinced him that this was not true. The combination of the readings of Neo-Platonism and the influence of Ambrose caused him to deeply consider committing his life to Christianity, despite the inner battle of sin. Still, he was overcome with conviction and shortly after his conversion, Bishop Ambrose baptized him into the Catholic church in Milan.

Theology

Grace and Free Will

From his own conversion onward, Augustine's theological views placed great emphasis on the sovereignty of God in bringing someone to repentance and salvation. For Augustine, he deemed it is only through divine grace that humanity can place their hope in for human beings cannot receive any benefits from God as they have separated themselves from God through Original Sin. According to King, Augustine describes grace as “superogatory
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on God's part but a genuine benefit to us, who are its undeserving recipients." [9] In one of his works, he supports this basis by writing, as if it were owing to the merit of our turning to God that His grace were given us, wherein He Himself even turns unto us. Now the persons who hold this opinion fail to observe that, unless our turning to God were itself God's gift, it would not be said to Him in prayer, " Turn us again, O God of hosts;" and, " You, O God, wilt turn and quicken us;" and again, " Turn us, O God of our salvation," — with other passages of similar import, too numerous to mention here. [10]

Grace then is completely essential for any good decisions of a fallen human person as human foreknowledge is not causative. Augustine argued that if we believe anything different, then we weaken the doctrine of total depravity.

Augustine's perspective on grace was founded on two major tenets. The first tenet that founded his conclusion on grace was his own personal salvation experience. He discusses his own slavery to sexual sin even after his conversion. He writes, " How vile, how detestable, how shameful, did we consider the embrace of a woman... Yet that same while we were lying awake and going over these things once more in our minds, you realized how differently from your claims those imagined caresses excited you." [11] This was the downfall of humans - we enslave ourselves to sinful patterns and it is only by a miracle we can be set free. The second tenet that he based his view of grace on was the Bible. In the Bible, he argued that every text suggested that everything God has given us is because of His divine power.

In addition, he argued that God purposefully gives us difficulty to provide an opportunity for divine grace such as with Job or Jacob and Esau. Chadwick expands on this by stating, “ Nothing in man, past, present, or future, can be the moving or meritorious cause of God’s election.”[12]Augustine developed the perspective that the human mind is not technically free and it greatly influences his doctrine on original sin.

Therefore, Augustine describes the will as the “ unforced reaching out of the rational soul toward something that it wishes to possess.”[13]He acknowledges the presence of freedom in will and admits that the will is irresistibly but freely drawn toward God. Essentially, motivation comes from the outside, but the main force is internal. As such, there is always a possibility to choose evil as seen in the Garden of Eden. Humans were made this way, but Augustine asserts that it is not the condition of the human race now. Therefore, the difference in the power of the will in the present is that free choice is no longer capable without outside support.

Original Sin

However, because of Augustine’s strong emphasis on predestination and the sovereignty of God, this ignited a great controversy in the church over original sin, free will, and grace. Reading works by Augustine and the prayer mentioned above, Pelagius immediately deemed this perspective to be the reason why moral impurity was running rampant in the Church. If Christians could not be obedient without the gift of God, then why should Christians try to practice consistent obedience in purity? Essentially, Pelagius believed that

human beings can choose to obey God all of the time because humans must be held responsible which strongly contradicted the view of Augustine.

In response to Pelagius, Augustine developed some writings that focus on a strong view of human depravity and God's sovereignty which include *On the Spirit and the Letter* (412), *On Nature and Grace* (415), *On the Grace of Christ and on Original Sin* (418), *On Grace and Free Will* (427), and *On the Predestination of the Saints* (429). In these works, Augustine strongly refined his view of original sin where he clearly stated that all humans regardless of time are declared sinful by God because of Adam's original sin. He states, "Who can recall to me the sins I committed as a baby? For in your sight no man is free from sin, not even a child who has lived only one day on earth." [14] For Augustine, he realized that babies were not even innocent of escaping the consequences of sin as they suffered upon birth before they had the ability to make cognizant choices. This means that bad choices must be punished communally as a human race rather than individually. Therefore, all humans except Jesus Christ are born not only depraved so that sin is inevitable, but also deserving of a just punishment for this sin according to Augustine.

However, Augustine does not seem to have a clear answer for how guilt is transmitted. Augustine must admit that he does not know, but he recognized that we are all somehow guilty once we are born into this world. He writes, "If it was Adam and Eve who sinned, what did we poor wretches do? How do we deserve to be born in the blindness of ignorance and the torture of difficulty?'...My response is brief: let them be silent and stop murmuring

against God.”[15]For Augustine, God’s reasons for punishing mere infants are simply beyond our human understanding.

Good and Evil

The problem of evil cannot be denied by any human and causes quite the problem for those who believe in a good God. Kaye and Thompson systematize the problem of evil into the following argument:

1. Evil exists.
2. If God does not know about evil, then He is not omniscient.
3. If God does know about evil, but cannot prevent it, then He is not omnipotent.
4. If God does know about evil and can prevent it but does not do so, then He is not omnibenevolent.[16]

Augustine’s views on this argument of evil are best summarized in *Concerning the Nature of Good*, which he wrote in response to the faulty logic of the Manichaeans. For Augustine, evil is a corruption of a God-created nature rather than a substance. Evil is simply “not being in accord with nature.”[17]This is articulated by Augustine when he writes, “Sin is not the striving after an evil nature, but a desertion of a better, and so the deed itself is evil, not the nature which the sinner uses amiss. For it is evil to use amiss that which is good.”[18]This is also true of natural evils. While individual actions are caused by bad choices directly, natural evils are caused by bad choices indirectly. Therefore, God is not responsible for evil, both individual actions and natural evil, because it is a result of our human choices.

A common question asked by Augustine's opponents was, "If God knows about evil, but does not do anything to prevent it, then how can He be good?" Augustine made the analogy similar to that of a parent and child. God wanted to create the world free from evil but knew that humans would not be truly happy without allowing us to live free lives. Therefore, God allows us to live our own lives and evil is just the cause of our free choices. While God's nature is perfect, any nature created *ex nihilo*, out of nothing, is automatically less than God and open to this possibility of corruption.[19]The only nature which is truly good and incorruptible is God's nature for He is the creator.

Works and Legacy

The surviving works of St. Augustine of Hippo fall into the date range of his conversion in 386 to his death in 430. Immediately after his conversion, he produced a number of books on various subjects while he was battling health issues. These include *Against the Academics*, *On Free Choice of the Will*, *Against the Academics*, and many others. Shortly after Augustine became a bishop, he developed *Confessions* which is the first major autobiography of Western literature and references much of his childhood. A few years later, Augustine published *City of God* in response to the devastating event of Rome being taken over. In this work, Augustine details the major differences between an earthly city and the heavenly city as many were claiming Rome was the city described in the Bible. Lastly, in his final years, Augustine wrote a work called *Retractions* in which he clarified any points from his earlier works to clear up confusion and misquotation of his intended meaning.

St. Augustine is arguably one of the most influential figures in the history of Christianity not mentioned the Scriptures in terms of contributions to the present-day church and through the development and distribution of the above works, Augustine left a variety of contributions to the church. While already discussed earlier, the first major contribution given to the church by Augustine was the concept of original sin. Augustine is responsible for detailing the complexity of this doctrine through realizing the innate desire within himself to sin as is discussed in his autobiography, *Confessions*. His emphasis on this doctrine of original sin resonated with the church and became official doctrine at the Council of Carthage (418 CE). The second major contribution that is based on a foundation of original sin is the concept of grace. For Augustine, grace is the unmerited gift of God which caused the great Pelagian controversy by church historians. This debate was a major theological discussion and the Augustinian view helped solidify the idea that man is broken in need of redemption which is found in grace alone. This perspective helped shift the notion that man can save himself to God alone has the power to save.

The third major contribution to the church that Augustine provided was in the realm of ethical life. Augustine states, “ In Christian times there can be no doubt at all as to which religion is to be received and held fast, and as to where is the way that leads to truth and beatitude.”[20]Augustine asserted that there must be something deeper than good actions, but rather in order to truly be good one must be driven by the right moral criteria. He emphasizes that Christianity is the only right belief that can make someone

truly ethical. This perspective on morality and ethics would greatly influence the church until the Enlightenment.

Lastly, Augustine provided the church with a unified body. In addition to the Pelagius controversy, Augustine also had major theological discussions with the Donatists. During times of early persecution, Donatists argued those who gave in to the emperor fearing their life deserved separation from the church. The Donatists formed their own sect of faith separating from the bishops who recanted claiming to be the true church without any sin.

Augustine combatted these ideas on the basis that it was causing disunity in the local church. Augustine defined what it meant to be a Christian by saying that love and unity were inseparable.[21] Because of Augustine's stern stance on the binding of love and unity while also advocating that Donatists be treated respectfully, these discussions were further discussed at the Council of Carthage as well (417 CE).

Conclusion

In conclusion, Augustine's influence on the early church in a time of crossroads cannot be overemphasized. In her book, Karla Pollman traces the legacy of Augustine in a unique way attempting to frame it as a success or a failure. Pollman shows the impact of Augustine's work on the Western world by focusing on both his highly popular early Augustinian writings and also his later writings that were heralded by modern thinkers. Therefore, due to being influential in a time of crossroads, Pollman argues that the influence of Augustine cannot be minimized to a single direction of success or failure.

Therefore, it cannot be denied that Augustine of Hippo is a key figure from the Middle Ages to current. His theological views on grace, the nature of good and evil, social and political philosophy, and many other streams of thought continue to have a major impact on these topics today. However, these streams of thought do not come without criticism or objection. Thus, possibly his most note-taking legacy was Augustine's ability to lead people to deeper thought driven by curiosity. For even Augustine states, " Free curiosity has greater power to stimulate learning than rigorous coercion."

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[2]Chadwick, Henry. *Augustine of Hippo: A Life* . (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 8

[3]Augustine, and Thomas Williams. *Confessions* . (2019), 17

[4]EP 57 16-20

[5]Augustine, and Thomas Williams. *Confessions* , 147

[6]Chadwick, Henry . *Augustine of Hippo: A Life* . (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 8

[7]On Augustine, 7

[8]

[9]Augustine, Anna S. Benjamin, and L. H. Hackstaff. *On free choice of the will* . (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964), 96

[10] *Ibid*

[11]Augustine, Augustine, Augustine, and Thomas F. Gilligan. *The Soliloquies of Saint Augustine* . (New York: Cosmopolitan science & art service Co, 1943), 376

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[16]Kaye, Sharon M., and Paul Thomson. *On Augustine*. (Belmont (CA): Wadsworth, 2001), 9-10

[17], Augustine, Anna S. Benjamin, and L. H. Hackstaff. *On free choice of the will*. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964)

[18]Concerning the nature of good, 36

[19]Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 263

[20]Augustine, *Of True Religion*. trans. J. H. S Burleigh. (John Knox Press: 1953), iii. 3

[21]Park, Jae-Eun. “ Lacking love or conveying love?: the fundamental roots of the Donatists and Augustine’s nuanced treatment of them.” *The Reformed Theological Review* 72, no. 2 (August 2013): 103-121.

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