

Augustine of Hippo



The story of the champion of free grace and one of the church's greatest theologians

With a marvellous conversion out of sexual immorality, Augustine became one of the church's greatest theologians, profoundly influencing both Luther and Calvin.

Augustine was born in what we now call eastern Algeria. The town was 60 miles inland and the Romans named it Tagaste.

His father was Patricius, a pagan, and his mother, Monica, a keen Christian, probably converted after marriage, and the home was middle-class. There were three children and Augustine was almost certainly born last, in 354AD.

By the time he was 16, at least two things had become very clear. One was that Augustine was very clever, and the second that he did not have the slightest interest in Monica's God. When he was 17, he was sent to Carthage to finish his education and that city, like many cities today, was full of moral temptations for young people.

He was soon to be found watching gladiators killing each other, and betting on who would win. He was a thief, his language was foul and his besetting sin was lust. The girl he was living with had a baby when Augustine was 18 and he had the nerve to give that child the name Adeodatus, which means 'given by God'. (Incidentally, Adeodatus did become a Christian although he died in his teens.)

Horoscopes and Rome

Monica was terribly upset by the lifestyle that Augustine had adopted and tried to speak to him. He said: 'I am a great believer in horoscopes, Mother, and my horoscopes say that my sins are controlled by the constellation that I was born under.' A great excuse?

She went to an old bishop, and pleaded with him to point out the error of his ways to Augustine. But the bishop knew very well that Augustine was at that stage of his life where he would not listen to a single word that was said to him. He said a firm 'No' to Monica and she burst into tears. As she left, the bishop said: 'It cannot be that the son of such tears will perish.'

When in 383, Augustine went to Rome, things went from bad to worse. How's this for a rotten trick? Monica knew that Rome had even worse temptations in it than Carthage, so she pleaded with Augustine not to go. Augustine said to her: 'OK, Mother, I won't go. Would you mind just waiting while I see a friend off on the ship? Go and wait in that empty church over there, it's not used at the moment.' She went into the church and waited there all night for him to come back, but, of course, he was on the boat with the mistress and the illegitimate child.

In Milan

385 found him in Milan. He was now 30 and had the job of Public Orator and Professor of Rhetoric, and it suited his purpose to make friends with the pagan aristocracy. He promised one of them that he would marry the daughter of the family when she came of age and because of that promise, he dismissed the mistress whom he has had since he was 17 and took the child. She was thrown out.

Then, when the waiting period before the marriage to this pagan aristocratic girl took too long, he took a second mistress to fill the gap. Most women, then and now, get bad treatment if they opt to be common-law wives. One of Augustine's reasons for writing his Confessions later on was to warn women of the consequences of such relationships.

The secret story behind what became of Augustine was actually locked into Monica's prayers. By providence, he found himself in Milan. By providence, there was a mighty preacher in Milan known as Ambrose. And in The Confessions, Augustine admits that he went along to church to hear some sermons just because he was interested in oratory. But one day, Ambrose preached a sermon on David's sin with Bathsheba and something went home in Augustine's mind. It was so powerful that he even wrote the words down. Listen to Ambrose's words in the sermon: 'That David sinned is human, that he repented is exceptional; men follow David into his sin but they leave him when he rises to confession and repentance.'

Tolle lege

In July 386, when he was 32, he opened his heart to his good friend Alypius and told him the full story of his inner turmoil. He wandered out into the garden of their house in Milan with tears of sorrow in his eyes and heard a child in the next garden playing. The child was saying: Tolle lege, tolle lege, it was some sort of a game - the Latin means 'pick up and read' or 'take and read'. He flung himself beneath a fig tree and picked up the scroll of Paul's letter to the Romans. It opened at chapter 13 verses 13 and 14. Later Augustine wrote: 'I had left the volume of the Apostle lying there. I caught it up, opened it and read in silence the passage on which my eyes fell: 'Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in immorality or indecency, not in strife and envying, but clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ and make not provision for the flesh to fulfil the lusts thereof.' I wanted to read no further, nor did I need to, for instantly as the sentence ended, there was infused into my heart the light of full assurance and all the gloom of doubt vanished away.'

The first practical thing that he did after that incident was to go to his mother Monica and say: 'Mother, your 32 years of praying for my conversion are over.'

During the next 44 years of his life up to his death, he wrote 70 books, of which the most famous is The Confessions. It appears regularly in the world's most important 100 books. From then on, his passion was to serve Christ. He says that he wrote The Confessions to show that God will save all who call on Jesus Christ, no matter what their condition and to prove that, using his own words: 'God has made us for himself and our heart is restless till it rests in him.'

Free grace

Augustine lived until he was 76 and died in 430. Every moment of that time was packed with service for Christ and, for us, in spite of some of his mistakes, he will always be one of the greatest Christians of all time. He was certainly an intellectual giant; a very persuasive evangelistic preacher and, supremely, he was the champion of free grace.

At one time in Augustine's life, there came a preacher called Pelagius. He was probably an Irishman who had settled in England and then travelled on the continent. This man went round teaching things which Augustine thought would cut at the heart of the gospel. What

were those things? One was this: Pelagius said that all people born are born innocent, as innocent as Adam was before the Fall of man into sin. Secondly, Pelagius said that nobody is ever enslaved by sin, because everybody has complete free will - so everybody in the world is free from sin and we only do bad things when we use this 'pure free will' to choose to go and do wrong things.

When Pelagius spoke about the grace of God, he meant external influences such as the example of Jesus. When Augustine heard about Pelagius teaching this in Rome, he started to recall how he himself had been totally gripped and enslaved by sin, even when he knew in his own heart what was right and what was true. He also knew that he had had no power inside himself to choose the right way to go. So Pelagius's teaching fitted neither Augustine's experience nor Augustine's reading of the Bible.

It was not until God's grace had set Augustine free that he realised that everybody's so-called free will is influenced, and, indeed, totally enslaved by inward sin.

Salvation is of the Lord

Augustine became the champion of 'grace alone'. He wrote 1,400 pages on this subject of grace against Pelagius.

Some people were going around saying that God's grace, his unmerited mercy, never becomes effective unless or until we use our free will or our faith to co-operate with God. All those centuries ago, Augustine realised that that was a more dangerous error, and more dangerous to the Christian gospel than what Pelagius had originally said. How was that? Because it denies the sovereignty of God's grace. That teaching about co-operating with God to make God's grace effective is known as semi-Pelagianism.

We do not use words like that today, but it really means that God apparently needs our help in order to make his grace effective, but the Bible insists that sovereign grace alone makes us willing to trust Christ as our Saviour. So the real truth is this: the only thing anybody can ever give to God to contribute to their salvation is their sin. Nothing else. We are saved by grace alone and brought to faith and that is what Augustine championed.

As the barbarians threatened the Roman empire, Augustine wrote *The City of God*, an explanation that, though worldly kingdoms fall, God's kingdom can never fall.

In the last year of his life, 50,000 barbarians landed on the north African coast and some of them laid siege to Hippo, the town where he was living. After three months of siege, he fell ill with a fever. He said to his friends: 'Would you please write out seven penitential Psalms for me, and have them in big letters so that I can see them from my sickbed.' Somebody said that it was time to make a will but he replied: 'There is no need for me to make a will, because I do not own anything.' He had long since made certain that he owned nothing. Christ took him to glory on August 28 430.

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