

Church History, Lesson 10

(This lesson is based on The Story of Christianity by Justo Gonzalez.)

AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO

Birth and Early Life:

- Augustine was born in 354 AD in the small town of Tagaste in North Africa.
- His father was a Roman official and followed the traditional pagan religion.
- His mother, Monica, however was a devoted Christian. She prayed tirelessly for her husband's conversion and eventually he did become a Christian.
- His parents recognized his giftedness and wanted the best possible education for him. He was sent first to a nearby town to study in Madaura, then later on to Carthage. He was 17 when he arrived in Carthage.
- Carthage was the cultural capital of North Africa. Augustine studied hard, but he also was determined to enjoy the pleasures of city life. Shortly after arriving, he acquired a concubine who fairly quickly bore him a son. Augustine's son was named Adeodatus, which means "given by God".

Early Studies:

- Augustine was a student of rhetoric. Most young men who were preparing to become lawyers or politicians studied the art of speaking and writing eloquently. They weren't so much interested in truth, they were interested in persuading their audience. "Truth" was left to the philosophers.
- However, Augustine was required to study Cicero as a part of his curriculum. Cicero's philosophy put Augustine on a quest for truth. He decided that just speaking with style wasn't enough, he needed to be able to know and communicate the truth.

Manicheism:

- The first stop on Augustine's search for truth was a religion called Manicheism.
- Manicheism started in Persia sometime in the 200's AD by a spiritual leader named "Mani".
- Manicheism is basically a dualistic religion / philosophy. It claims that both in the universe and in each one of us there are two basic realities: light and dark, good and evil, spiritual and matter. "Salvation" in this religion is being able to separate the two realities and allow the "spiritual" side of us to return to "pure light".
- Manicheism seemed to appeal to Augustine for 2 reasons:
 - A part of their propaganda consisted of ridiculing Christianity because of the Bible's "crudeness". The Bible speaks of violence and other sins in a very frank manner, and some portions of the Bible do not follow the rules for good style. And like the Manicheans, this offended Augustine's sense of rhetorical style.
 - The second reason that Manicheism appealed to Augustine is that it provided an answer to the question of original evil. The Scriptures teach that there is only one God who is infinitely good. Augustine wondered how an infinitely good God could allow evil. Manicheism answered that concern by basically saying that there are two competing realities in the universe, both good and evil.
- Augustine became a student of Manicheism, but never really a member. He would sometimes voice his doubts about the religion / philosophy in some of their meetings. And the leaders would speak about a Manichean leader named Faustus who would be able to answer his concerns. When the leader arrived in Carthage, Augustine was just as disappointed with his answers as anyone else's.

Move to Milan and Conversion:

- Augustine took a teaching job in Milan because his students in Carthage were unruly. It was here that he began to espouse Neoplatonism.
- Neoplatonism emphasized study, personal discipline, and mystical contemplation. Through these one could reach a level of spiritual ecstasy and reach the "ineffable One".

- This philosophy with religious overtones explained original evil a bit differently than Manicheism. Neoplatonism claims that there is only one primary reality in the world, the “ineffable One”. And that all other realities are defined by how close they are to that central “One”. Those that are closest to the “One” are good, those that are farthest removed are evil. Evil wasn’t an entity unto itself (or a competing reality / god), it was defined by removing itself from good. This appealed to Augustine because it explained original evil but without demanding there be two competing realities (gods) in the world. In some ways, this was a step toward Christianity for Augustine.
- The next major question for Augustine regarding Christianity was the “crudeness” of the Bible. At the time, Monica, his mother was living with him in Milan. She encouraged him to attend the sermons of Ambrose (remember Ambrose of Milan who humiliated the Emperor).
- Augustine went mostly to hear the eloquent rhetoric of the famous preacher. However, because Ambrose interpreted many passages of Scripture allegorically, it removed Augustine’s objection that Scriptures are crude.
- So now, most of Augustine’s intellectual objections to Christianity were removed. However, he didn’t want to give up his lifestyle! Because of the emphasis on the monastic life at the time, he assumed that he would have to remain celibate if he became a Christian. It was at this time that he would pray, “Give me chastity and continence; but not too soon.”
- One day he fled to the quietness of a garden to consider the spiritual battle that raged within him. He heard some children playing and one of them for some reason shouted out “Take up and read. Take up and read. Take up and read.” Just before that, Augustine had set aside a manuscript he was reading (perhaps in frustration). He took the words of the child to be a message from God and returned to his reading. He read the words of the Apostle Paul from Romans 13:
Romans 13:13-14 –¹³Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. ¹⁴But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.
This is where he surrendered himself to God and was converted.
- He was baptized, along with his son, by Ambrose. Monica had persuaded him to dismiss his concubine after many years. He never even mentions her name.
- Augustine then made plans to return to Africa with his mother and some friends and pursue a life of monastic retreat. However, his mother died on the way and their journey was delayed by the overwhelming grief. When Augustine and his friends finally arrived in North Africa he sold most of his property and set up a “monastery” where he and his friends sought an “orderly life” not one of extreme rigor like many monks of that time. His son Adeotatus died shortly after this point.

Augustine’s Theological Legacy: Augustine’s theological contributions to the church center around 3 primary topics and 2 primary books that he authored.

But first – After a period of time, Augustine traveled to Hippo from Cassiciacum (the sight of his “monastery”) to invite a friend to join him there. At Hippo the bishop Valerius noticed that Augustine was in the congregation one Sunday and decided to preach about how God provides shepherds for his people. He then instructed his congregation to pray for God’s guidance, just in case there was someone in the congregation that very day who was sent by God to shepherd that very congregation!

The congregation responded as Valerius had hoped and Augustine was ordained to serve alongside him. There was a rule that a bishop could not leave his church for another, so this guaranteed that Augustine would remain at the church in Hippo for the rest of his life.

There was also a rule that said there couldn’t be two bishops in one church, but apparently neither Valerius nor Augustine knew about that rule.

Primary Issues:

- Freedom of the Will contra Manicheism
- Just War Theory – contra Donatism
- Salvation by GRACE – contra Pelagius

Primary Writings:

- Confession of Augustine
- The City of God