

## Church History: Augustine of Hippo

### Early Life – Context of Augustine’s life

- Born in Thagaste North Africa (present day Algeria) in 354 AD
  - North Africa was the “bible belt” of the roman empire
- Father (Patricius) was pagan (not Christian), but his mother (Monica) was a committed Christian
  - Monica was a strong outspoken Christian, who doggedly pursued the conversion of her son to the faith.
- Live in the period of Roman decline, just prior to the onset of the dark ages
  - Cracks in the empire had already started forming
  - Various barbarian tribes have started pressing their influence into various roman territories (Rome was sacked in 410, Hippo was taken in 431 after Augustine’s death)
  - Final fall of the western empire just decades after Augustine’s death (476)

### Adulthood – Search for Satisfaction

- Started studying rhetoric as a young man (teenager)
  - Rhetoric was considered one of the highest academic pursuits
- Became involved with a religious sect called Manichaeism
  - Manichaeism is based on the teachings of Mani who combined many teachings from Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, “Christianity” (mostly heavily gnostic perversions of Christianity like Docetism), and other near east mystic religions
  - Taught a duality to the world, material realities being evil, and spiritual realities being good. It has a real emphasis on cosmology and the problem of evil.
- Moved to Carthage (at 21) to continue studying then teaching rhetoric and started living with a woman (a concubine)
  - Concubines in this period of time are similar to a common law wife in our culture
  - They had one son together, Adeodatus (in Latin his name means “given by God”)
  - Pursued his concubine primarily for sexual satisfaction
- Moves to Rome to pursue a more prestigious teaching career and to further his understanding of and involvement in Manichaeism.
  - Becomes disillusioned with Manichaeism and starts pursues Neoplatonism instead
  - Some Manichean friends introduce him to the prefect of Rome, who has him apply for a professorship in Milan (where the imperial court is located at that time)
- Moves to Milan and take up the position of imperial professor of rhetoric
  - Monica moves to Milan to urge Augustine to convert and cast off his worldly pursuits
  - Monica arranges a respectable marriage for him causing him to send off his concubine
  - He takes another concubine and breaks off his marriage arrangement.
  - He also finds his embrace of Platonism lacks the ultimate satisfaction that he is looking for
  - He is at the very top of his field in professional achievement, but his life begins to spiral into a state of despondence.

Conversion – “Our heart is restless, until it rests in you”

- Hears of a Bishop in Milan, a preacher named Ambrose who is said to speak with remarkable persuasion and rhetorical eloquence
- He is impressed with Ambrose's ability to speak and persuade, but even more by his being a "friendly man" and his "receiving me as a father would"
- He is encouraged by some friends to investigate the Christian perspective more.
- One day (in AD 386) while reading about the life of Saint Anthony (a desert monk) in his garden, he hears a child's voice singing a song with the words "take up and read, take up and read"
- He opens a nearby bible "randomly" to Paul's letter to the Romans and reads:

"Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires." Romans 13:13-14

- In that moment he is converted. He is baptized by Ambrose a year later with his son Adeodatus (who dies a short time afterwards).
- Monica, also dies a short time later, having seen her son and grandson embrace the faith, which she had prayed so long for.

#### His Christian Life – a inner monk living in the outward world

- Augustine was drawn to a semi-monastic, complete life studying the scriptures, teaching, and preaching
- He returns to his home in Africa, sells off his family inheritance (business, land, etc.). He retains his home and invites friends to come live a semi-monastic life with him studying the scriptures.
- As he was investigating establishing a monastery in the nearby city of Hippo, he was pressed into the priesthood by the local church in Hippo.
- The bishop of Hippo, Valerius, did not speak the local north African language, so he had Augustine assume the duties of preaching.
- After Valerius dies, Augustine becomes the bishop of Hippo in 394.
- In his life he writes 80+ books and tracts (over 4 million words), and delivers more than 6,000 sermons (500+ still survive today).

#### Augustine's Legacy – defender of the faith, faithful pastor, and champion of Christ's role in culture

- Augustine wrestled intensely with the scriptures to defend biblical perspectives and truths on three overarching topics: the nature of man and his relationship with God, how Christians relate to one another in the Church, and How Christians engage with the world and culture around them
- On the nature of man and his relationship with God
  - Spoke out strongly against the teaching of Pelagius regarding our fallen nature and our need for God to initiate a relationship with us.
  - He created the framework for what is now the protestant understanding of grace, sin, and human accountability
    - The only means or ability we have to please God or live according to his will, is to do so in faithful dependence on his grace

- “Lord, command what you will, and grant me the grace to do what you command” - Confessions
  - He articulates a biblical description of the fallen human will, that both affirms real choices and accountability, and which clearly expresses the biblical understanding of our fallenness and enslavement to our own sinful desires from birth
  - Augustine’s Pears
- How Christians relate to one another in the Church
  - Taught harshly against church separatist movements such as the Donatist, but he extended grace, fellowship, and communion to members of such groups.
  - He taught extensively on the sacraments particularly regarding their value and effectiveness.
  - He dealt with the issues of priest, bishops, and other church leaders that fall into sin.
  - He taught that there is a true, universal, church of believers, but the church that is visible to the world is full of both saints and sinners.
  - He believed that the primary role of the bishop was to shepherd the flock by interpreting and preaching to them the Word of God. He believed that the bishops preaching should bring the life of the Gospel to the lost sinner and strengthen the faith and assurance of God’s children.
  - He supported and encouraged his friend Jerome to translate the Greek Old and New Testament scriptures into the common Latin language (the Latin Vulgate)
- How Christians engage with the world and culture around them
  - *The City of God* – A massive treatise on the role temporal kingdoms play versus the eternal Kingdom of God. Augustine recognized earthly authorities have a role, to exercise restraint on evil, but we do not place our faith in the establishment of governments, and magistrates, but rather we look with hope to the eternal kingdom of God and to our ruling King Jesus.
  - First Christian to describe a biblical position for a just reason to engage in war or conflict
    - For individuals he generally taught passivism
    - For ruling authorities, he taught that war can be right or just if it is in defense against aggressors, for the sake of preserving life and preventing the rule of evil
    - Christians can fight as soldiers as an extension of the ruling authorities, so long as they fight according to their biblically informed conscience, do not engage in atrocities, and fight to defend life and the rule of evil authorities
  - Taught extensively about slavery as an affront to the image of God and forcefully persuaded Christians to free their slaves and to purchase the freedom of others in bondage so far as they were able. He also encouraged the empire to abolish the slave trade
  - He affirmed the dignity and responsibility of the Christian to work and be fruitful in labor.

Further Reading:

*Augustine’s Confessions*