

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 26

St. Augustine – Part One

Last week, we covered the basics of St. Augustine's life as revealed in his autobiography (of sorts), the *Confessions*. This week, we will spend our time studying core principles of Augustine's theology. Augustine so influenced theology that theologians have given the name "Augustinianism" to concepts associated with him.

One cannot easily give a full assessment of Augustine's views on certain theological issues. Because he wrote so much for so long, some matters in Augustine's writings almost seem to contradict each other. This is not surprising. Over the decades, one would expect to see growth and change as Augustine's viewpoints mature and he faced different challenges. The net effect, however, is that many who write about Augustine, or who seek his support for various views, are often able to find what they want/need even though the support may not be that strong in the balance of his work!

Since this is not a graduate course on Augustine but one seeking literacy on the basic concepts of his thought, we do not need to fret much over these differences beyond simply noting they exist.

Augustine had much to say over many theological topics. His thought was significant to the church's understanding of faith and reason, core philosophy, the Trinity, Christology,¹ interpretation of scripture, how we come by knowledge, and other things. We will address three areas of Augustine's thought which, according to theologian Roger Olson, are core areas where Augustine affected the development of Christian theology: (1) good and evil, (2) the Church and its sacraments, and (3) grace and free will.²

AUGUSTINE ON GOOD AND EVIL

Before we explore Augustine's views on this subject, we ought to put the issues he faced into a focus that makes sense to us. A few questions seem in order!

¹ One of Augustine's great statements about Christ cannot be passed over! Augustine wrote, "Out of a certain compassion for the masses God Most High bent down and subjected the authority of the divine intellect even to the human body itself" to redeem mankind. *Answer to the Skeptics*, iii, 19, 42.

² Roger Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, Chapter 17.

First an easy one: Who made the good things in the world? Who is the creator of good? Well, the answer seems as obvious to us as it did to those in Augustine's age – "God." No believer has had problems answering that one. The next question is the perplexing one: Who made evil? Did God??? Did our creator God make evil people, make sin, and make sinners?

Those questions plagued the early church, and continue to bother certain folks in the church today! The questions fed the Gnostic philosophies as well as other philosophies closely associated with Gnosticism. Last week, for example, we discussed that Augustine was involved in a cult for much of his early adulthood. That cult was called "Manichaeism." The cult sought an intellectual answer to the questions on the origination of evil.

Manichaeism taught that God made all good things, but God could never make anything evil. To suggest that God was the creator or source of sin and evil seemed, in their eyes, to be a great affront to God. Even today, many say or think, "I cannot believe in a Christian God who would create a world or people who have evil and sin."

In response to these questions, Manichaeism taught that God did in fact make all that is good. But, that which is evil and sinful was made by an evil force or being. We might word it this way – God made the good things in the world, but Satan made the evil. God and Satan are in a cosmic fight where God's peace and love, the things of the spirit, are in struggle against Satan's created evil and hatred. In an almost Gnostic fashion, the Manicheans believed that God's good things were the unseen spiritual things while the evil was material-based and worldly.

Like no other in his age, Augustine was the one best positioned to stamp out this cult movement. The movement claimed intellectual superiority over Christianity, and yet Augustine was more brilliant and intellectual than any in the movement. Although Augustine had been a Manichaean disciple for years, he left Manichaeism behind *before he became a Christian* because Manichaeism did not offer adequate answers to his intellectual challenges and questions.³ Furthermore,

³ The ultimate question that the Manicheans were unable to answer for Augustine involved the cosmic battle of good and evil. If there was a God who was incorruptible and good, and if there was an evil principle that wanted to engage God in this cosmic fight (our existence on earth being the battle ground), then why did God choose to engage in the battle? If God did so for fear he would lose or get injured by the evil principle, then God was not truly incorruptible (which God needed to be to justify the whole belief system in the first place!). The corollary issue was: if God could not be injured, then logically, God had no reason to engage in battle and allow "particles of goodness" to be captured by the evil force. Either way, there is no satisfactory answer for Augustine and the religion fell apart on logical grounds (*Confessions*, vii, 2,3).

because of his time spent as a teacher within the Manichaean religion, Augustine had credibility when he spoke of it and its problems.

So, we find in Augustine writings that not only brought about the demise of a major cult, but also brought a theological understanding and terminology about the origin of evil that would ultimately become a basic tenet in most all Christian doctrines and dogmas.

Augustine found his answers in his adaptations of the Neo-Platonic Greek philosophy circulating still in his day. Much like Origen (who we studied a number of lessons back), Augustine thought it appropriate to use the truths he could glean from secular philosophy and spiritualize them. This was the equivalent of the Jews “plundering the Egyptians” as they were leaving in the exodus.

Neo-Platonism taught that material existence and goodness were not two dueling forces, but rather both parts of a whole. As Augustine saw it, God created only good and all good. The evil we observe was never created. It was/is merely a corruption of the good God created.

Although Augustine did not have 21st century medical knowledge, we can use it to analogize as a way of explaining Augustine’s view. We might think of cancer. Cancer cells are not the normal cells of a body. Rather, they are the defective corruption of cells that otherwise would be normal. In this analogy, evil was never made by God, Satan or anyone else. God made good and when that good is corrupted, it becomes what we call “evil.”

Of course, the next logical question becomes, “How can God make something good that can become corrupted? If it can become corrupted, then was it ever really “good” to begin with?

To answer this question, Augustine put forward several arguments. Most notable, Augustine set forward his belief that God himself alone is perfect.⁴ God made man and the earth and pronounced it “good,” not “perfect.” Anything created, Augustine reasoned, by definition must be less perfect than that which always existed. Hence, God’s nature could never be subject to change or corruption, but not so for those things created!

⁴ In this sense, Augustine meant God in the fullness of the Trinity. Augustine was an absolute Trinitarian, as you would expect from a disciple of Ambrose. About the Trinity, Augustine was reputed to have commented on the mysterious nature of the Trinity saying, “if you deny it you will lose your salvation, but if you try to understand it you will lose your mind!” Notwithstanding that comment, we do find reams of Augustine’s writings on the Trinity!

A second argument Augustine used centered on man possessing the gift of freedom. Free will, by definition, means man has a choice to do a higher good or a lesser good. Inherent in this choosing ability is the option of corrupting good. In this sense, Augustine saw real evil not as the action itself. Any action could be good if done right with right motives. The real evil or corruption is the evil “will” which makes choices and corrupts what otherwise could be good. In this sense, eating is something God gave us as a good thing. Choosing to eat beyond good sense is gluttony. That is sin, but the evil is the choice to overeat, not the inherent eating.

Augustine did not claim that full understanding of this issue was ours to have. Instead, he would speak of the “mystery of iniquity.” Like the mystery of the Trinity, that did not keep Augustine from writing on it a good bit!

Olson summarizes this Augustinian point well:

Augustine...was able to provide certain models for Christian thinking about God, creation, sin and evil that have become deeply ingrained in at least Western Christian thought ever since. God is infinite, absolutely omnipotent, perfectly spiritual and free from every defect.... But evil as the privation of the good is inevitably a possibility in any creation and especially in one that includes morally free and responsible created agents such as angels and human beings.⁵

AUGUSTINE ON THE CHURCH AND ITS SACRAMENTS

The Manichaean cult was not the only problem facing Bishop Augustine and his flock in the early 400's. The Donatist movement was another (perhaps even stronger) issue facing the church in North Africa. Donatism's origins came from the days of religious persecution and martyrdom by the state some 100 years earlier. A number of church leaders recanted their faith in the face of persecution and possible death. Then, along came the decrees of Constantine that “legalized” and legitimized the Christian faith. Afterwards, many of the church leaders who had recanted in the face of persecution reclaimed their faith publicly. The big issue became whether those who had denied faith could reassume priestly and pastoral positions in the church.

The Donatist believed that those who had recanted their faith or aided the Romans in persecuting the church were not valid Bishops. Similarly, the lineage of Bishops and church leaders ordained by these defective Bishops was also tainted

⁵ Olson at 264.

and illegitimate. So, the church and its authority structure were considered impure and so was its teaching.

Augustine went after the Donatists full force, and in doing so shaped a number of church views for the future! Augustine would never dispute that the church had both good and evil in it, for it was full of fallen people. Still, Augustine considered that there was only one church, whether mankind choose to acknowledge it or not. Augustine argued that the Donatists were walking in a sin of division destroying the unity of the church.

Because the Donatist believed that the church leaders were tainted, they argued that baptisms and communion given by the illegitimate leaders were equally illegitimate. In response to this belief, Augustine argued that the power of the sacraments (baptism⁶ and the Lord's Supper) was in the elements themselves, not the priest administering the elements. The meaning of the sacrament was that God met man there, not that the priest brought God and man together. The key for Augustine was that the Bishop giving the elements be appointed in proper apostolic succession. In other words, the Apostle had chosen their successors as leaders. Those successors then chose the ones to follow them, etc.

AUGUSTINE – GRACE AND FREE WILL

A monk from Britain named Pelagius came to Rome around 405 A.D. At that point, Christianity was a morally different religion than in the times when Christianity was illegal. When you could get killed for being a Christian, those who were of faith lived lives of deep devotion and moral character. Once Christianity became not only legal, not only socially acceptable, but something that even helped further your economic and political life, those of the faith included many whose lifestyle did not reflect great piety or devotion.

Such was the situation when Pelagius came to Rome. He found folks living in great obvious sin without any great care about it! Pelagius was rightfully horrified. After looking into the situation a bit deeper, Pelagius decided that the cause for the moral disregard for holiness was in large part because of Augustine! Pelagius came across a prayer of Augustine that Pelagius saw as a core cause. The prayer was one expressing hope in God's mercy because God was the reason we can abstain from sin. Without God, we have no hope of purity or holiness.

⁶ Augustine believed that the waters of baptism were regeneration waters. That is, in baptism, God washed away guilt of the original sin with which we are born. Without baptism, Augustine believed there could be no forgiveness of sins. Even infants who died without baptism were to suffer either Hell or at best "Limbo." Limbo was considered a place of neither heaven nor hell that would hold those who were unregenerated yet without real personal guilt.

Pelagius was upset! He saw Augustine as teaching that, absent God's aid, man will sin. Pelagius believed that left people sinning while they waited for God to give them the gift of abstaining!

Pelagius went to work. He wrote two books on the subject attacking the "view" of Augustine. Pelagius taught that man was born morally pure. He rejected the doctrine of "original sin." For Pelagius, it was simply a matter of choice. People could choose to be righteous and sin free or people could choose to sin. Pelagius was never too clear on the need for God's grace in the salvation process. Pelagius believed that one was baptized into a right relationship with God, but technically, the real need of grace to Pelagius was the "grace" or "gift" of scripture. At that point, mankind should be able to take scripture and choose to live righteously. In fact, Pelagius even believed that one could live a perfect life, never sinning in any degree. He would add that no one had actually done that except Jesus, but theoretically, it *could* be done.

Augustine went after Pelagius for a long time! Augustine wrote against his teachings publishing books from 412 up through 429 (which was several years *after* Pelagius died). Augustine taught the doctrine of original sin. In Augustine's understanding, Adam's sin corrupted all of Adam's offspring. Anyone conceived of man and woman would have the same sinful nature as Adam after the fall from Eden.⁷ The sin of Adam and Eve tainted all their offspring. This meant that everyone was guilty and rightfully condemned before God. Augustine relied heavily on Paul's letter to the Romans for his teaching on this point.

Augustine taught that if Pelagius was right, if man could live without sin, then Christ died for nothing. Augustine also taught that absent the sacrament of Christ's blood, man could neither be redeemed nor justified from God's righteous wrath.

The conclusion Augustine ultimately drew from his beliefs centered on the absolute necessity for the intervention of God in his grace and sovereignty to save those whom God chose. Augustine was, at least by the time of his last writings, teaching that God's selection was the only way mankind could turn from his sinful nature and find salvation. If we were to ask Augustine why some people are saved and why others are left to hell's condemnation, Augustine would ultimately refer to the mystery and secrets of God that we do not know or understand. These were what he called God's "hidden determinations."

⁷ This was one reason Augustine taught that Jesus must have had a virgin birth. Augustine believed that since Jesus' birth was not from the union of a man and woman, Jesus could be born without the original sin of Adam and Eve.

Augustine's views on this issue were not as absolute in his earlier life as they were later in life. When Augustine wrote his commentary on Romans, he would assert the predestination principle but with a free will twist! Augustine argued that God made the choice of who would believe, but that choice was made based on God's foreknowledge of those he foreknew *would* believe.⁸

Later, Augustine wrote *The Predestination of the Saints* (around 428-429) answering a man's questions on some passages in Romans. Then, Augustine would write that we really have nothing of our own to boast over, not even the faith we have.

CONCLUSION

Regardless of how we view Augustine's analysis of predestination and free will, we must be impressed with the language and force of Augustine's understanding of God's grace. Augustine would write, "The human race lies ill, not with diseases of the body, but with sin.... To heal this huge patient the omnipotent physician descended from heaven. He lowered himself to mortal flesh, as if to the bedside of ailing humanity."⁹

Calling Christ the Good Samaritan, Augustine wrote, "The passing Samaritan did not scorn us; he cared for us, put us on his animal, and on his own flesh brought us to the inn, that is, the Church."¹⁰

As we consider Points For Home, we do well to hold to the teachings of scripture that challenge and assure us as taught by Augustine as well as a few he seems to have viewed differently from many of us:

1. "God is light; in him is no darkness at all" (1 Jn 1:5).
2. God is perfect, not our church (1 Jn 1:6).
3. God saves the lost who cannot save themselves (1 Pet 2:9; Gal 2:21).

⁸ *An Explanation of Some Propositions From the Letter to the Romans* (written around 394-395) 52.

⁹ *The Soliloquies*, 87, 9, 13.

¹⁰ *Homilies on the Psalms*, 101, s. ii, 11.