



# 3: Augustine

In an age dominated by 'feelings' Augustine's writings are a challenge to start thinking again – he's more than a first day cover!

In this occasional series **Jon Garvey** looks at some of the great upholders of the Gospel over the last 2,000 years, what they taught, what they mean for today – and sometimes their faults, too.

If this is a series about giants, Aurelius Augustinus (354-430) is a giant among giants. There is a breadth and depth to his writing which is possibly unparalleled in Christian history. It is fair to say that, aside from the Bible, his writings were the main impetus for the Reformation 1200 years later, and this alone should accord him more respect than he is often shown nowadays.

### Confessions

Though brought up in the Church in his native Algeria he rejected the Bible and joined the heretical *Manichees*, which appeared to offer greater wisdom, whilst pursuing a career as a teacher. But he was finally and dramatically converted at age 32 through the prayers of his mother, and the preaching of Ambrose, Bishop of Milan. His book about this, *Confessions*, happens to be the very first modern autobiography.

At first his theology was heavily influenced by Platonic philosophy, yet even then he saw that for a Christian, faith is the key to understanding and not *vice versa*, a fundamental principle. Soon he was pressured into pastoral ministry, and his teaching began to be dictated by the needs of the Church both locally and more widely, as is the case for so many of the best teachers over the centuries.

Additionally, his teaching was increasingly moulded by a deep study of Scripture. It is important to recognise this dependence on God's word when his teachings seem controversial. Scripture often changed his opinions on issues where he had once taken a more "commonsense" view. In fact, the development of his

theology and his humility are shown by the fact that, later in life, he published a book of *Retractions* to correct any misconceptions his earlier writings might have caused.

### Sin, grace and election

His study of Romans about this time convinced him of the depth of human sin, and the need for God's sovereign election and grace in salvation. This involved a careful examination of the limitations of man's free will under sin. It is this that makes *Confessions* such a great book, since his honest self-examination enabled him to see how God's grace alone, rather than his searching, had brought him to living faith.

This all came to a public head when a friend drew his attention to the teaching of a British monk, Pelagius, some years later. Pelagius probably started with the humanly laudable motivation of trying to improve the scandalous lifestyle of Christians he met in Rome, and elsewhere. Indeed, he has made something of a comeback in recent years amongst some Charismatic leaders. But Pelagius' own writings show that, Biblically speaking, he had a completely defective understanding of sin and grace. He defined sin as conscious disobedience to the known will of God, and held that we are all by nature perfectly capable, as Adam was, of a life of obedience, if only we exercise our "free will" aright. In other words, he denied the doctrine of the fall and the witness of the Old Testament. He mentioned God's grace, but understood it in completely unscriptural terms as God's assistance to those seeking to do good, for example by providing the law and the mes-

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sage of the Gospel to those virtuous enough to use them.

In refuting these ideas from Scripture, Augustine refined his own understanding. Since the controversy has been recycled repeatedly ever since, often with little understanding of the real issues involved, it is well worth reading the "Anti-Pelagian" writings. They are less easily available than some of his other works, but one cannot pretend to have understood the arguments without studying them. Suffice it to say that they formed the cornerstone of the gospel of Luther, and all the Reformation teachers, until the challenge of Arminius in the 17th century. **Put simply, if Pelagius was even half right, salvation cannot be by faith alone.** In fact, the Church at the time rejected Pelagius, but did not fully endorse Augustine's position – and the end result was the "Babylonish Captivity" of mediaeval Catholicism.

### The Trinity

**A**s this controversy quietened down, Augustine had more leisure to study the doctrine of the Trinity. Previous attempts had concentrated on trying to express the Bible's teaching in philosophical categories – hence the arguments over the exact meaning of "substance", "person" and so on. Augustine's approach was more relational, and was built at least partly on the understanding that, since man was created in the image of the Triune God, God's nature would be seen reflected in the internal nature of man.

Augustine was no more able fully to explain the inexpressible than former writers had done, but he developed new ways of looking at the question that have guided the development of our understanding of the Trinity ever since.

### The City of God

**T**he last major work of Augustine's life was a massive examination of the sweep of God's salvation history called *The City of God*. The mediaeval Church took this book as a justification for Roman Christendom, and modern writers often accuse him of sanctifying the role of the Roman Empire after Constantine in God's salvation. It actually does neither, and for a mainstream Catholic bishop to rise above the triumphalism of Church and Empire just a century after Constantine, shows the depth of his Biblical understanding.

*The City of God* surveys Scripture to show how, **from the time that Cain killed Abel and**

**went on to build the first city, God's people have been outside the political systems of the world.** The Tower of Babel; the call of Abraham from Ur to live in tents; Israel's exodus from Egypt to the desert; Tyre, Sidon, Nineveh and Babylon as opponents of God's people – all these show that here we have no lasting city.

Likewise in the New Testament, our Lord was put to death "outside the city", and earthly Babylon (Rome) will be destroyed to make way for the New Jerusalem, the sole hope of God's people. Maybe the threat to Rome from the barbarians (who overran North Africa around the time of Augustine's death) was one reason to question its spiritual importance. Even so, his book would have been of real value to those experiencing the downfall of the institution that seemed to embody Christ's reign. I suspect many Americans need to read it today!

Pre-millennialists find Augustine's view on the millennium in *the City of God* difficult. But it is important to understand that Augustine changed his earlier pre-millennial opinion from studying Scripture. He saw the whole Church Age – the last days – as the 6th day of creation, to be superseded at Christ's coming by the Sabbath rest of God. He concluded that this age, when Christ reigns through His Spirit and His Church – is the millennium of Revelation 20, symbolically described. The term "amillennialism" is therefore misleading, for Augustine did believe in the millennium, but now rather than later. Christ's coming will bring the new heavens and the new earth, not for a thousand years, but forever.

### Downsides

**B**ig men have big faults". In Augustine's case, most criticism simply comes from disagreement with his views, often ill-conceived. His most blameworthy feature was his advocacy of coercion to correct heretics. In his defence, he had found it worked! But unfortunately it legitimised the tortures and burnings done in Christ's name in later centuries.

### Sources

**C**onfessions is a must-read, available in cheap paperback. *The City of God* is published by Penguin and is much thicker! Other works, including the anti-Pelagian corpus, can be downloaded from the Christian Classics Ethereal Library (<http://www.ccel.org/>), and his teaching is summarised in *The New Dictionary of Theology* (IVP) (p.58).

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