

CHURCH HISTORY (7): Nicene (4)

In this lesson and the two that follow, we want to consider the life and ministry of one of the most important people in church history: Augustine of Hippo (354-430). No single person has had greater influence upon the church in general and the Protestant Reformation in particular. "It is Augustine who gave us the Reformation" (Warfield);¹ "No theologian of the first fifteen hundred years of the church stands taller than Augustine of Hippo" (Lawson);² "The greatest of the Church Fathers was Augustine" (Kuiper).³

The Reformers were led by Augustine's writings into a deeper understanding of Paul, and so prepared for their great calling. No church teacher did so much to mould Luther and Calvin; none furnished them so powerful weapons against the dominant Pelagianism and formalism; none is so often quoted by them with esteem and love.⁴

I. Augustine of Hippo

1. *His early life, conversion, and death.* (1) His early life. "Augustine entered the world on Sunday, November 13, 354, in the small town of Tagaste near Carthage in North Africa, now Algeria. His father was a middle-class Roman official and a typical pagan. With no interest in Christianity, his chief desire was to see his son advance in Roman culture. But Augustine's mother, Monica, was a Christian of great piety. It has been said that she ranks as one of the famous mothers of history" (Lawson).⁵ Having recognized in their son unusual intellectual abilities, Augustine was sent to Carthage to study rhetoric. "He was seventeen years old when he arrived at Carthage. Although he did not neglect his studies, he also set out to enjoy the many pleasures that the city offered. Soon he had a concubine who bore him a child. He named the boy Adeodatus ('given by God')" (Gonzalez).⁶ In his studies he began to read Cicero, and thus, "came to the conviction that proper speech and style were not sufficient. One must seek after truth." This led him to Manicheism (an Eastern false religion) and then Neo-Platonism (a philosophy with religious overtones). Augustine grew restless with his new pursuits, and eventually accepted a call to teach in Milan (Italy). Since his father died, his mother relocated with him and his son. He had two fundamental problems: he confessed a love for immorality, and he harbored intellectual struggles against Christianity.

(2) His conversion. "Monica insisted that he should hear Ambrose's sermons. As a professor of rhetoric, Augustine agreed to attend the services led by the most famous speaker in Milan. His initial purpose was not to hear what Ambrose had to say, but to see how he said it. However, as time went by, he found that he was listening to the bishop less as a professional, and more as a seeker" (Gonzalez).⁷ Augustine himself confessed, "I began to like him, at first indeed not as a teacher of the truth, for I had absolutely no confidence in Your Church, but as a human being who was kind to me. Nevertheless, gradually, though I did not realize it, I was drawing closer to You."⁸ Thus, having his intellectual struggles largely answered by Ambrose, his love for iniquity was conquered by a radical conversion to God. "Now LORD, my helper and my redeemer, I shall tell and confess to Your name how it was that You freed me from the bondage of my desire for immorality, in which I was so closely fettered, and from my

¹ B.B. Warfield, *Works*, 4:130

² Steve Lawson, *Pillars of Grace*, 179

³ B.K. Kuiper, *The Church in History*, 78

⁴ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:1022

⁵ Steve Lawson, *Pillars of Grace*, 183

⁶ Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 1:208

⁷ Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 1:211

⁸ Augustine, *Confessions*, Book 5:13

slavery to the affairs of this world" (Augustine).⁹ His conversion occurred in the summer of 386. In great agony of soul, Augustine, along with a close friend, sat quietly in a garden behind his house.

I flung myself down on the ground somehow under a fig tree and gave free rein to my tears; they streamed and flooded from my eyes, an *acceptable sacrifice to Thee*. And I kept saying to You, not perhaps in these words, but with this sense: '*And Thou, O Lord, how long! How long, Lord; wilt Thou be angry forever! Remember not our former iniquities.*' For I felt that it was these which were holding me fast. So I spoke, weeping in the bitter contrition of my heart. Suddenly a voice reaches my ears from a nearby house. It is the voice of a boy or girl (I don't know which) and in a kind of singsong the words are constantly repeated: 'Take it and read it. Take it and read it.' So I went eagerly back to the place where my friend was sitting, since it was there that I had left the book of the Apostle when I rose to my feet. I snatched up the book, opened it, and read in silence the passage upon which my eyes first fell: 'Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in lewdness and lust, not in strife and envy. But put yet on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts.' The next thing we do is to go inside and tell my mother. How happy she is! We describe to her how it all took place, and there is no limit to her joy and triumph. Now she was praising You, Who are able to do above that which we ask or think; for she saw that with regard to me You had given her so much more than she used to ask for when she wept so pitifully before You. For You converted me to You in such a way that I no longer sought a wife nor any other worldly hope. And You had changed her mourning into joy, a joy much richer than she has desired and much dearer and purer than that which she looked for by having grandchildren of my flesh.¹⁰

The next year (387), Augustine, his friend (Alypius), and son (Adeodatus), were baptized by Ambrose. "A few months later, accompanied by his mother, he set out for North Africa a different man. On the journey, however, near Rome, his mother died. And during the fall of 388, he lost his son. Augustine was now as eager to leave the world as he had once been to plunge into it. It was not to be. His gifts were too well-known and the need for leadership in the church was too great for him to be left in peace" (Shelley).¹¹ When Augustine reached his home town (Tagaste), he sold most of the property he inherited, gave some of the money to the poor, and with the rest established a small monastery. "In 391 he visited the town of Hippo in order to talk to a friend whom he wished to invite to join the small community. While at Hippo he attended church, and the bishop, who saw him in the congregation, preached about how God always sent shepherds for the flock, and then asked the congregation to pray that God would add a shepherd to that church" (Gonzalez).¹² Less than a year later, Augustine was ordained bishop of Hippo, where he wrote most of his works in the midst of pastoring, for the next thirty-nine years.

(3) His death. "On the 28th of August, 430, in the seventy-sixth year of his age, in full possession of his faculties, and in the presence of many friends and pupils, he passed gently and happily into that eternity to which he had so long aspired" (Schaff).¹³ "As Augustine was dying he had the penitential psalms of David written out and fixed to the wall of his bedroom, where he could read them repeatedly so that he

⁹ Augustine, *Confessions*, Book 4:1

¹⁰ Augustine, *Confessions*, Book 8:6-12

¹¹ Bruce Shelley, *Church History*, 136

¹² Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 1:211

¹³ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:1022

could confess his sins and praise God for His mercy to him in the words of the Psalms" (Calhoun).¹⁴ "For ten days he prayed and wept and communed alone with God, and then he died" (Litfin).¹⁵

2. *His pastoral labors and writings.* (1) His pastoral labors. Augustine served as bishop of Hippo from 391 to his death in 430. As bishop, Augustine "revolutionized the Church of Africa by his ceaseless labors and illuminated the world by his abundant writings" (Warfield).¹⁶ "Augustine's labors extended far beyond his little bishopric. He was the intellectual head of the North African and the entire Western church of his time. He took active interest in all theological and ecclesiastical questions" (Schaff).¹⁷ "Augustine often preached five days in succession, sometimes twice a day, and set it as the object of his preaching, that all might live with him, and he with all, in Christ. Wherever he went in Africa, he was begged to preach the word of salvation. He faithfully administered the external affairs connected with his office, though he found his chief delight in contemplation" (Schaff).¹⁸ "For 39 years he lived in Hippo and carried on a ministry, including preaching great sermons. It has been remarked of his preaching that he never held back for fear that some of his ideas might go over the heads of some of his hearers" (Calhoun).¹⁹

In 397, Augustine began a treatise entitled, *On Christian Doctrine*, which would contain four books in its finished form. Books I to III deal with the interpretation of Scripture, Book IV sets forth his theory of rhetoric (preaching). (a) The purposes of preaching. He provides three functions of preaching (in keeping with classic rhetoric): teaching, delighting, and persuading. "To teach is a necessity, to delight is a beauty, to persuade is a triumph" (Augustine).²⁰ "The interpreter and teacher of the divine Scriptures—therefore, the defender of right faith and the hammer of error—has the duty of both teaching what is good, and un-teaching what is bad" (Augustine).²¹ For Augustine, the preacher should teach in such a way as to bring delight to the hearer. Not in mere eloquence, but in the delightful content he proclaims. "In the course of an address, the truth is clearly pointed out (and this is the true function of teaching), it is not the intention, that the style of speech should make the truth pleasing, or that the style should of itself give pleasure; but the truth itself, when exhibited in its naked simplicity, gives pleasure, because it is the truth" (Augustine).²² But for Augustine, faithful preaching also seeks to persuade or move the hearer. "It is the duty of the preacher, when he is trying to persuade the people about something that has to be done, not only to teach, in order to instruct them; not only to delight, in order to hold them, but also to sway, in order to conquer and win them" (Augustine).²³

(b) The styles of preaching. In keeping with the threefold purposes of preaching (teaching, delighting, and persuading), Augustine suggested (again as taken from Cicero and classic rhetoric) a threefold style (or manner) of preaching: "That speaker shall be eloquent, who can say little things in a subdued style, in order to give instruction, moderate things in a temperate style, in order to give pleasure, and great things in a majestic style, in order to sway the mind" (Augustine).²⁴ In other words, according to Augustine, tone, force, and volume, must harmonize with the subject matter. By "subdued style" he meant calm, by "moderate style" he meant affectionate, and by "majestic style" he meant authoritative.

¹⁴ David Calhoun, *Ancient and Medieval Church History*, 15:7

¹⁵ Bryan Litfin, *Getting to Know the Church Fathers*, 226

¹⁶ B.B. Warfield, *Works*, 4:130

¹⁷ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:1022

¹⁸ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:1022

¹⁹ David Calhoun, *Ancient and Medieval Church History*, 15:7

²⁰ Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 2:583

²¹ Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 2:584

²² Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 2:583

²³ Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 2:583

²⁴ Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 2:586

"While the teacher ought to speak of great matters, he ought not always to be speaking of them in a majestic tone, but in a subdued tone when he is teaching, temperately when he is giving praise or blame, but powerfully (majestically) when forcing a mind that is averse to the truth to turn and embrace it" (Augustine).²⁵

(c) The piety of the preacher. "But whatever may be the majesty of the style, the life of the speaker will count for more in securing the hearer's compliance. The man who speaks wisely and eloquently, but lives wickedly, may, it is true, instruct many who are anxious to learn; though, as it is written, he 'is unprofitable to himself.' Wherefore, also, the apostle says: 'Whether in pretense or in truth Christ is preached.' Now Christ is the truth; yet we see that the truth can be preached, though not in truth—that is, what is right and true in itself may be preached by a man of perverse and deceitful mind. Such men do good to many by preaching what they themselves do not perform; but they would do good to very many more if they lived as they preach" (Augustine).²⁶

(2) His writings. His writings (which contain over five million words), can be divided into five categories: (a) Autobiographical writings. These are two, his *Confessions* and *Retractions*. (b) Theological writings. Augustine wrote numerous doctrinal treatises. Some of these would be, *On Christian Doctrine* (397-426), *On Faith, Hope, and Love* (421), *On the Trinity* (395-420), and *The City of God* (413-426). (c) Polemical writings. These include treatises against the Manicheans, Donatists, and Pelagians. (d) Letters. Almost 300 personal letters of Augustine have survived. (e) Exegetical works. He wrote expositions of various books of the Bible: Genesis 1-3 (401-415); Psalms (405); John (416-417); First John (417); the Sermon on the Mount (393); a Harmony on the Gospels (400); Galatians (393); and Romans (unfinished). In addition to these, it's estimated Augustine preached over 8,000 sermons in his life, of which about 500 have survived.

3. *His Confessions*. The *Confessions* of Augustine is autobiographical. It's one extended prayer to God in praise of His perfections and salvation. "Of all autobiographies none has so happily avoided the reef of vanity and self-praise, and none has won so much esteem and love through its honesty and humility as that of St. Augustine" (Schaff).²⁷ "This unique book was written about 397-400, say about a dozen years after Augustine's conversion and shortly after his ordination as bishop of Hippo—at a time when he was already formed in both life and thought. There is laid bare to us in it a human heart with a completeness of self-revelation probably unparalleled in literature" (Warfield).²⁸ "The book traces Augustine's spiritual journey, sin and all. He recounts his life before Christ, his conversion, and his return to Africa, concluding at age thirty-four" (Lawson).²⁹ Prior to his death, Augustine wrote of his *Confessions* in his *Retractions*, "The Thirteen Books of my Confessions whether they refer to my evil or good, praise the just and good God, and stimulate the heart and mind of man to approach unto Him."³⁰

The first nine books of the *Confessions*, what we would call 'chapters,' are autobiographical. He tells us about his story, from his birth up through his conversion and even beyond. The great theme there is sin and grace—Augustine's sin and God's grace. Then books 10 through 13 are quite different. Students have often tried to figure out how those latter books connect with the first books. By book 10 Augustine is dealing with some difficult issues, philosophical and theological issues like memory, time, and

²⁵ Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 2:586-7

²⁶ Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 2:595-6

²⁷ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:990

²⁸ B.B. Warfield, *Works*, 4:234

²⁹ Steve Lawson, *Pillars of Grace*, 198

³⁰ Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 1:33

eternity. The last four books make explicit what is only hinted at in the autobiographical parts. So the story of Augustine wandering away from God and then being brought back to God and restored is reflected in the greater picture of all of creation restored to God in God's own time.³¹

Augustine famously began His *Confessions* by saying, "*Great are Thou, O Lord, and greatly to be praised; great is Thy power, and Thy wisdom is infinite.* And man wants to praise You, man who is only a small portion of what You have created and who goes about carrying with him his own mortality, the evidence of his own sin and evidence that *Thou resistest the proud.* Yet still man, this small portion of creation, wants to praise You. You stimulate him to take pleasure in praising You, because You have made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they can find peace in You."³² Thus, the *Confessions* is largely the testimony of Augustine's own restlessness, until he, by sovereign grace, found peace in God.

(1) He confessed his former sins. "For the space of nine years (from my nineteenth to my twenty-eight year) I lived a life in which I was seduced and seducing, deceived and deceiving, the prey of various desires. My public life was that of a teacher of what are called 'the liberal arts.' In private I went under cover of a false kind of religion. I was arrogant in the one sphere, superstitious in the other, and vain and empty from all points of view."³³ Later he wrote, "Allow me this, I beg, and grant me the power to survey in my memory now all those wanderings of my error in the past and to offer unto You the sacrifice of rejoicing. For without You what am I to myself except a guide to my own downfall! Or what am I, even at the best, except an infant sucking the milk You give and feeding upon You, the food that is imperishable! And what sort of a man is any man one can name, seeing that he is only a man? So let the strong and the powerful laugh at us; but let us, weak and needy as we are, make our confession to You."³⁴

Augustine himself provides various reasons why he detailed his past sins, "I want to call back to mind my past impurities and the carnal corruptions of my soul, not because I love them, but so that I may love You, my God. It is for the love of Your love that I do it, going back over those most wicked ways of mine in the bitterness of my recollection so that the bitterness may be replaced by the sweetness of You, O unfailing sweetness, happy sweetness and secure! And gathering myself together from the scattered fragments into which I was broken and dissipated during all that time when, being turned away from You, the One, I lost myself in the distractions of the Many."³⁵ "To whom do I narrate this? And to what end? I am telling these things in Your presence to my own kind, to that portion of mankind, however small it may be, which may chance to read these writings of mine. And my object in doing so is simply this: that both I myself and whoever reads what I have written may think *out of what depths we are to cry unto Thee.* For what comes nearer to Your ears than a confessing heart and a life of faith?"³⁶

Thus, he confessed his prior sins to better value and appreciate God's grace, and to instruct and encourage the saints. "So in confessing not only what I have been but what I am, the advantage is this: I make my confession not only in front of You, in a secret *exultation with trembling*, with a secret sorrow and with hope, but also in the ears of the believing sons of men, companions in my joy and sharers in my mortality, my fellow citizens and fellow pilgrims—those who have gone before and those who follow

³¹ David Calhoun, *Ancient and Medieval Church History*, 15:2

³² Augustine, *Confessions*, Book 1:1

³³ Augustine, *Confessions*, Book 4:1

³⁴ Augustine, *Confessions*, Book 4:1

³⁵ Augustine, *Confessions*, Book 2:1

³⁶ Augustine, *Confessions*, Book 2:3

after and those who are on the road with me. These are Your servants and my brothers; those whom You have willed to be Your sons, my masters whom I am to serve if I wish to live with You and of You. And this word of Yours to me would be a little thing if it only gave me a spoken command and did not also go in front of me in action. And so I do it both in deed and in word; I do it under Your wings, and the danger would be too great if under your wings my soul were not subdued to You and my weakness known to You. I am only a little child, but my Father lives forever and my Protector is sufficient for me. For He is the same who begot me and who watched over me, and You Yourself are all my good, You Almighty, who are with me even before I am with You. So it is to people like this, those whom you command me to serve, that I shall show not what I was, but what I now am and continue to be."³⁷

(2) He confessed salvation is of grace. "The seeking and saving grace of God is the fundamental theme throughout. The events of Augustine's life are not, then, set forth in it by themselves. Only such events of his life are set down as manifest how much he needed the salvation of God and how God gradually brought him to that salvation" (Warfield).³⁸ Augustine wrote to a friend in 429, about his *Confessions*: "Accept the books of my *Confessions* which you have asked for. Behold me therein, that you may not praise me above what I am; in these believe what is said of me, not by others, but by myself; in these contemplate me, and see what I have been in myself, by myself; and if anything in me please you, join me, because of it, in praising Him to whom, and not to myself, I desire praise to be given. For 'He has made us, and not we ourselves;' indeed, we had destroyed ourselves, but He who made us has made us anew. When, however, you find me in these books, pray for me that I may not fail, but be perfected."³⁹ He himself wrote in his *Confessions*: "O Lord my God, tell me what You are to me. Say to my soul, I am your salvation. Say it so that I can hear it. My heart is listening, Lord; open the ears of my heart and say to my soul, I am your salvation. Let me run toward this voice and seize hold of You. Do not hide Your face from me: let me die so that I may see it, for not to see it would be death to me indeed."⁴⁰

(3) He confessed God is his chiefest delight. Warfield said of the *Confessions*, "The whole account of his life-history is written not that we may know Augustine, but that we may know God: and it shows us Augustine only that we may see God" (Warfield).⁴¹ "Too late came I to love You, O Beauty both so ancient and so new! Too late came I to love You – and behold You were with me all the time. For my sin was this – that I looked for pleasures, beauty, truths not in God Himself but in His creatures (myself and the rest), and so I fell straight into sorrows, confusion, and mistakes. You called, You cried out, You shattered my deafness: You flashed, You shone, You scattered my blindness: You breathed perfume, and I drew in my breath and I pant for You: I tasted, and I am hungry and thirsty: You touched me, and I burned for Your peace."⁴² "I will leave those who deny the truth outside, blowing onto the dust and obscuring their vision with earth, and *I will enter my chamber* and sing to You songs of love, groaning *with groanings unutterable* in my far pilgrimage, remembering Jerusalem with heart stretching out in longing for it, Jerusalem my country, Jerusalem my mother, and You the ruler of it, enlightener, father, guardian, husband, the chaste and strong delight, the solid joy and all good things unspeakable, all, all together at once, because You are the one supreme and true good. And I shall not turn aside until from this dispersed and deformed state of mine you gather all that I am into the peace of that city, our dear mother, where are *the first fruits of my spirit* and from which my certain Knowledge is derived, and so You will conform and confirm me forever, my God, my mercy (Book 12:16)."

³⁷ Augustine, *Confessions*, Book 10:4

³⁸ B.B. Warfield, *Works*, 4:234

³⁹ Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 1:584

⁴⁰ Augustine, *Confessions*, Book 1:5

⁴¹ B.B. Warfield, *Works*, 4:237

⁴² Augustine, *Confessions*, Book 10:27