CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 67: St. Augustine: Sinner, Bishop, Saint

Augustine & the Battle for Orthodoxy: Did You Know?

Misinterpreted for centuries, this painting now sheds light on Augustine and his remarkable life.

Elesha Coffman

Until the 1950s scholars thought this painting depicted Jerome, as the piece is the third in a series of scenes from Jerome's life. Then one scholar finally connected the painting with an apocryphal letter in which Augustine (purportedly) says he was writing to Jerome when "suddenly an indescribable light, not seen in our times, and hardly to be described in our poor language, entered the cell in which I was. ... When I saw this, moved by amazement and admiration, I suddenly lost strength of my limbs." Thus the figure is Augustine; the light at the window is Jerome, who has just died (note the hourglass in the lower right) but whose spirit visits Augustine to warn him against scholarly hubris.

Though Augustine and Jerome never met, they kept up a lively, albeit sporadic, correspondence. The war of words began in 394, as each attacked the other's scholarship. But by Jerome's death in 420, they had patched things up and were fighting side-by-side against the Pelagian heresy.

In placing Augustine in an idealized sixteenth-century study, the painter, Vittore Carpaccio, has taken liberties of which the saint surely would have disapproved. For one thing, the face is not that of a North African. The portrait likely honors Cardinal John Bessarion, a fifteenth-century scholar and statesman who lamented the fall of Constantinople (1453) as Augustine had lamented the fall of Rome (410).

Augustine would have found the astrological equipment in the room offensive. Though he had a passion for astrology in his youth, he forcefully denounced the pursuit in his Christian writings. The bronze statuette of a nude female (on the ledge at left) is also out of place in the study of a once-profligate man who later chose celibacy and would not allow a woman—even his sister—to enter his house.

The rear-center of the painting depicts liturgical items a bishop like Augustine would have known well: Scriptures, an incense boat, candlesticks, and a bishop's miter and crozier. Ironically, Augustine never even wanted to be a priest. When Valerius, bishop of Hippo, urged him during a sermon to accept ordination, the congregation literally pushed him to the front of the church. Augustine, feeling God had "laughed him to scorn," wept from the shame of having once mocked the church and its leaders. (The congregation thought he was disappointed at being made a priest rather than a bishop.)

The sheet music at Augustine's feet illustrates the saint's lifelong love of song. As he wrote of his baptism: "The tears flowed from me when I heard your hymns and canticles, for the sweet singing of your Church moved me deeply. The music surged in my ears, truth seeped into my heart, and my feelings of devotion overflowed."

It's appropriate that the study would be filled with books—94, to be exact. This is the same number of his own works that Augustine catalogued and corrected in his ***Retractions***, written around 426.

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Augustine & the Battle for Orthodoxy: From the Editor - A Giant-But A Man

From the Editor

Mark Galli

Because Augustine is such a towering figure in Western history, one of our goals for this issue was to describe his "everyday" self. We discovered he was both more extraordinary and more human than the legend we knew.

Yes, he was a brilliant theologian whose mind ranged over a vast array of issues (human nature, the Trinity, original sin, the church) with greater depth and dexterity than many of today's theological specialists.

Yes, he was a regal bishop who used his ecclesiastical authority to reign in schismatics and refine the teachings of the church—this is the view of Augustine handed down through the art of the ages, as the images in this issue show.

But Augustine was also a human being who struggled with common, run-of-the-mill weaknesses: sex, vanity, self-recriminations, a hot temper, and bouts with despair.

Though his insights have shaped Western thought for more than 1,500 years, he was a searching, confused, and waffling young man on his way to his conversion: see Robert Payne's article, "The Dark Heart Filled with Light."

Though he exercised his authority as bishop in teaching and administering, he was always sensitive to the pastoral dimension of his office: see Bruce Shelley's article, "The Bishop at Work."

Though he engaged in philosophical theology, he also tried to answer practical questions that Christians of his day, and ours, face: see our special section "What Would Augustine Say?"

This is our second issue on Augustine. The first (issue 15) gives a good overview of his life and legacy. Here we've tried to narrow our focus and give you a greater sense of his complexity as a great thinker, but also as a man.

With this issue, I step down as editor of ***Christian History***. I've been connected with the magazine for six years, the last four as editor.

The magazine has been a dream job for me. Each quarter I've been allowed to become a minor specialist in one era, person, or event—but then, before I get immersed in minutia, I have been able to move on to another topic! So I envy the staff who remain—Marshall Shelley, Elesha Coffman, Rai Whitlock, and Janine Petry.

Everyone around here says my editing will be missed. Perhaps. On the other hand, ***Christian History*** has for some time been a team effort, and the fact that most of the team remains insures that the high quality you've come to expect from the magazine will continue. This issue, which was pulled together

with relatively little input from me, is a case in point.

As for me, I'm moving on from "Christianity Yesterday" (as a friend put it) to ***Christianity Today***, where I have been managing editor since May 1. As I depart, I want to thank the many loyal readers of Christian History who over the years have offered support and encouragement (and the occasional correction). It's another reason why editing ***Christian History*** has been a pleasure. Thanks.

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The Dark Heart Filled With Light

Augustine's early years reveal an intense, proud, and sensual man who yearned to know truth.

Robert Payne

Few writers have captured Augustine's personality as vividly as did Robert Payne in "Augustine: The Sensualist" in The Fathers of the Western Church***. Payne (1911-1983) was a distinguished writer whose works included novels and non-fiction, biography and poetry, transaltion, and short stories. Though recent scholarship might nuance some of Payne's interpretations, his overall portrait of Augustine as a man stands. This excerpt, reprinted with permission, takes us from Augustine's youth to his famous conversion.***

Augustine belongs to our time. The most wanton of the saints, the man with the clearest mind, the most exalted opinion of himself, the subtlest knowledge of himself, he speaks a language we know only too well. He belongs to the times of crisis, when human minds go wheeling after the final purposes.

There is no leisure in him: he burns himself up with the fury to know all things, to determine all things. Named for two ruthless emperors, Augustine and Aurelius, he could be ruthless as well. And like the great modern psychological novelists, he is armed with a scalpel and is prepared to knife the soul until it reveals its secrets.

Problem child

"Augustine was a Numidian, one of those strange people who inhabited the northern coastal plains of Africa, neither black nor European, but descended like the Basques from some earlier race of settlers. He was tall and long limbed, thin chested, with sloping shoulders. He had a long nose, a high forehead, thick lips, and tremendous eyes, and he did not walk so much as take large, loping strides. His skin was a kind of dark bronze; his eyes were black.

He was born on Sunday, November 13, 354, in the town of Thagaste in what is now Algeria. It was a pleasant town with high white walls, set among wooded fields. Ilex and pines grew beside the streams, lions roamed in the forests, and boar, hare, redwing, and quail were to be hunted a stone's throw from the city walls.

The town, built by the Romans, had a theater, a forum, baths, long colonnades of marble columns, and a marketplace of some importance. Among the patricians who ruled over the destiny of the town was a certain Patricius, a landowner who possessed a farm and a number of slaves. He seems to have been a stern taskmaster who was never quite reconciled to having Augustine for a son.

There were good reasons for this. The child had an ungovernable temper. He lied often, he liked playing more than he liked study, and he was also a thief, on his own confession. Worse still for Patricius, the son possessed a desperate affection for his mother, Monica, and none for his father.

Patricius, a stern old member of "the very splendid council of Thagaste," possessing all the privileges of the minor nobility (though not an abundance of wealth), desired above everything that Augustine should become a man of culture. Beyond that, he had little interest in the child, allowed the boy to do as he pleased, and cared nothing at all about his morals. When much later Augustine drew up the

balance sheet of his father's behavior, the greatest crime of Patricius was precisely that he allowed the boy to be as immoral as he pleased.

Monica was 22 when Augustine was born. There was already an elder son, Navigius, and a daughter, her name unknown, who became a nun. It is possible that Augustine deliberately omitted to record her name for the same reason that he never mentioned the name of his mistress or that of a young man he once bitterly grieved over: in some deep way, she may have hurt him. He was easily hurt.

Augustine spent much time playing a curious game called "nuts." In this game, three seashells and a pea are shuffled dexterously together, and the winner is the one who discovers under which seashell the pea is hidden. Augustine played the game well, but he bitterly denounced others with quicker fingers who cheated better than himself.

He stole from the kitchen, from the cellar, and from the table. He was a convincing liar to his tutor and to his schoolmasters. He was an excellent shot with a stone and won "splendid victories" against schoolboys whose gashed and bleeding faces were evidence of his prowess.

As for his lessons, Augustine had an abiding horror of them. Most of all he detested arithmetic and Greek: Greek because it was difficult, and arithmetic because it was senseless. "What on earth," he asked, "is the use of repeating one plus two equals three?" He was thrashed repeatedly in school, for impudence and for playing dice and bones in class. Years later when he was an old man and wore the miter of a bishop, the memory of those thrashings remained vivid in his mind; he would conjure up in an agony of remorse the stripes on the bleeding flesh.

Young lust

At 12 he was sent to school at Madaura, an old Numidian city, proud of its antiquity and pagan to the core. For the first time, he fell in love with letters. He read Virgil, weeping over Dido's death; he studied well, received an unusually large allowance from his father, and appears to have joined a pagan sect (years later an old Madauran grammarian called Maximus rebuked him for deviating from paganism).

Also, he read love poetry. His senses had always been keen, and in this hot city, his first experiments in sensuality occurred. It was not love but raging lust. He speaks about these things openly, with little compassion for his own wayward youth.

"I dared to roam the woods and pursue my vagrant loves beneath the shades," he says, perhaps referring to the woods surrounding Madaura or perhaps referring only to the shelters where lovers lie. "Lord, how loathsome I was in Thy sight," he says in his ***Confessions***. "[Lust] stormed confusedly within me, whirling my thoughtless youth over the precipices of desire, and so I wandered still further from Thee, and Thou didst leave me to myself: the torrent of my fornications tossed and swelled and boiled and ran over."

But unchastity was not his only sin. Once, during his holidays, he robbed a pear tree. He tells of the event with a quite extraordinary psychological profundity. He desired to rob the tree, and he did rob it, but he was impelled neither by hunger nor poverty. In fact he did not want the pears at all; there were better ones in his own orchard.

Even after the theft he took no joy in what he had stolen. "But I took joy," he says, "in the theft and in the sin." His knowledge of sin was to increase prodigiously in later years.

Augustine's father died when he was 16. He would have been forced to become a workman if Romanian, a distinguished citizen of Thagaste, had not come to his help. Romanian was wealthy and given to fits

of generosity, and he was so highly respected that even during his lifetime his statue was erected in the marketplace. Augustine worshiped him and was given an allowance. He had shown talent in literature already, and now Romanian sent him to Carthage to study.

Carthage was the place he had dreamed of, the greatest seaport of the western Mediterranean, a place of legends, dedicated to the gods Astarte and Venus, a softly shining city between the lakes and the sea, with her capitol and her palatine and her teeming colleges. "Carthage," wrote Apuleius, "is the heavenly muse of Africa, the inspirer of the Roman people," and so it was. All the races congregated there.

The city was pagan. The goddess Tanit was worshiped, disguised now under the name of ***Virgo Coelestis***, the Virgin of Heaven. Augustine attended the ceremonies performed for the goddess. "Our eager eyes," he said, "rested in turn on the goddess and on the girls, her adorers."

Talking in Punic, mingling with the crowds, enjoying life with a mistress, his blood rising to fever heat, his father dead and his mother far away, Augustine threw himself into the delights of the city.

Before he left Thagaste to come to Carthage, his mother had given him a solemn warning:

> "My mother commanded me not to commit fornication, and especially that I should not defile any man's wife. This seemed to me no better than women's counsels, which it would be a shame for me to follow. ... I ran headlong with such blindness that I was ashamed among my equals to be guilty of less impudence than they were, whom I heard brag mightily of their naughtiness; yea, and so much the more boasting by how much more they had been beastly; and I took pleasure to do it, not for the pleasure of the act only, but for the praise of it also."

Fevers of the mind

However, a change was coming over him. Though the fevers of the flesh remained, there were now fevers of the mind. He threw himself into his studies, becoming an excellent Latin scholar: he went on to study rhetoric, mathematics, music, and philosophy. "My unquiet mind was altogether intent to seek for learning," he wrote.

He made friends easily, and some, like Alypius, Nebridius, and Honoratus, became friends for life. He read the book of Cicero called the ***Hortensius***, which survives only in fragments. He also began to ponder how he should spend his life: it occurred to him that one could hardly spend it better than in acquiring wisdom.

But what was wisdom? Some students spoke of Christ, others of Mani, the Persian who had suffered crucifixion and introduced a sacrament of bread and fruit. Mani had affirmed the eternal coexistence of two kingdoms, one of darkness, the other of light. Eternal war was waged between light and darkness, between good and evil.

Mani proclaimed that he was an apostle of Christ, who, Mani argued, was not born, never became a man, and never died. Manicheism had much in common with Gnostic Christianity. Its dualistic belief, its hatred of established Christianity, and its oddly unconvincing demonology made Christians abhor it.

Augustine confessed later that it was because the Manichees spoke of "truth" that he was seduced into believing them; if they had used some other word he might not have fallen so easily. He had decided that he prized truth most, and he would rise in the Manichean hierarchy, for he was already disposed to be ambitious.

Having joined the sect, he returned to Thagaste, only to discover that Monica, who had grown even more fervent in her Christian faith during his absence, regarded him now as a sinner fallen beyond redemption. She threw him out of the house.

Augustine simply walked to the house of Romanian, explained the situation, and was allowed to lodge in the rich man's villa as tutor to his son Licentius. He continued to earn acclaim from his speeches, he played with astrology, he enjoyed the pleasant life of a rich man's adopted son, he acquired a taste for expensive things, and he knew perfectly well that in all Thagaste there was no one so brilliant, so promising as Augustine.

Then the bubble burst. His closest friend, "the one who was sweet to me above all sweetness of this life," died. What was worse, when his friend became deathly ill, he received the Christian sacrament. Augustine was appalled. The boy had been a Manichee. They spent their leisure time together, discussed everything together: why had he suddenly changed his religion?

Augustine never discovered the answer to the question. "I resolved to wait until he should regain his strength, then I would speak frankly with him." But though strength returned for a while, a few days later the boy died.

Wild panic of grief

Confronted with death, Augustine threw himself into a wild panic of grief. "This darkness fell upon my heart," he wrote, "and wherever I looked there was only death. My country became a torture, my father's house pure melancholy. All the pleasures I had shared with him turned into hideous agony now that he was gone. My eyes sought for him everywhere, and found him not. I hated all familiar sights because he was not there."

This grief cleared the way for his conversion. He remained a little while longer a Manichee, but he could not prevent himself from thinking of the boy's death. There followed the long struggle between the Manichee and the Christian in Augustine's soul.

Shortly after the death of his friend, Augustine found himself debating with Faustus, the most learned Manichee in North Africa, and doubts began to arise over the relevance of the Persian religion. Was evil a substance? Did the Manichees promise the resurrection of the flesh?

He was restless: there were no satisfactory answers to these questions. Then where was truth? Monica, who had forgiven him and now allowed him to live under her roof, insisted that the truth lay with Christ.

Augustine thought the truth probably lay in a legal career in Rome: he would become another Cicero. He decided to leave for Rome as soon as possible. Monica clung to him, refused to let him go.

He was adept at subterfuge, and when everything was prepared for the journey, he allowed Monica to accompany him to the seashore. He pretended he had a friend on one of the boats in the harbor and promised to return in the morning. That night Monica spent in a small oratory sacred to the memory of Cyprian, the protector of Carthage. When she woke up, her son was gone.

Putting away old loves

In Rome Augustine still held to the remnants of his belief in Manicheism, a belief he shared with his old school friend Alypius, who sought him out and stayed close to him during the ensuing years. Augustine fell ill, apparently of a malarial infection, and thereafter the debate with himself grew

more relentless. Where was the truth? In beauty? In God? In the war between the forces of light and darkness? There were moments when he gave way to a savage nihilism, and other moments when he flirted with Neoplatonism.

All the time he continued his studies in rhetoric, until he became the most brilliant of the young disputants in Rome. The Roman prefect was Symmachus, who had close connections with Manicheism. When the university of Milan asked through the prefect for a new teacher of rhetoric, Symmachus pointed to Augustine.

By the time Augustine reached Milan, he was prepared to abandon the Manichees. Their arguments were too arbitrary.

"They say the golden melon comes from God's treasure house, but the golden fat of the ham and the yolk of an egg are evil," he wrote. "Why so? And why does the whiteness of lettuce proclaim to them the divinity, while the whiteness of cream proclaims only evil? And why this horror of meat? For, look you, roast suckling pig offers us a brilliant color, an agreeable smell, an appetizing taste—sure sign, according to them, of the divine presence." Manicheism was rooted in materialism; Augustine's spirit, like his wit, was already taking wings.

Everyone in Milan called on Ambrose, and Augustine was not long in calling upon the bishop who already bore the character of a saint. "He received me," wrote Augustine, "like a father and was pleased enough at my coming in a bishoply fashion." Ambrose was held in honor; Augustine evidently envied the aura of dignity surrounding him. Also, Ambrose was noted for his style in delivering sermons—another cause for envy.

Milan was the imperial capital, the residence of the boy Emperor Valentinian II. In this brilliant court, Augustine hoped to find a sinecure. His earnings already made him comparatively wealthy: he could afford to pay for the passage of his Carthaginian mistress and her son, Adeodatus. He was popular. He had a villa, and there were a number of friends from Carthage to make him feel at home: his brother Navigius, two cousins Rusticus and Latidianus, Alypius, and a few others.

Soon he invited Monica, and Monica decided the time had come for her son to put his mistress aside and take a wife of higher social status. He could keep the boy, but the girl must go. For some reason Augustine consented. "When they took from my side her with whom I had slept for so long, my heart was torn at the place where it stuck to hers, and the wound was bleeding."

There followed what may have been the most painful period of his life. Monica prayed, hoping against hope that he would alter his ways, become a Christian, and surrender to the will of God.

The crisis, long expected and long prayed for, came in July 386. When he came to speak about this strangeness that came to him, he could find no better description than that it possessed the quality of a steady, perfect light.

"At such times," he wrote, "I am conscious of something within me that plays before my soul and is light dancing in front of it; were this brought into steadiness and perfection in me, it would surely be eternal life."

But there were not many times when he was aware of this light, and all his life by his own account he was fully aware of it only once—in a garden, on a hot summer's day.

"Why not now?"

As Augustine tells the story, the day began ordinarily enough. He was staying in the villa with Alypius and his mother. There came a visitor, an officer of the imperial household called Pontitian, an African and a Christian, who had arrived from Treves.

They sat down to talk, and suddenly Pontitian observed a book lying on the table, a table that had been marked out for a game of dominoes. Pontitian opened the book idly and was surprised to discover that it contained the epistles of Paul. Delighted, he spoke of his own conversion, of Antony and the anchorites of Egypt, then of the monasteries of Italy, and particularly of the monastery outside the walls of Milan where Ambrose sometimes officiated.

Pontitian praised the ascetic life and told the story of two of his friends who, upon reading ***The Life of St. Antony***, determined to join a monastery. Some days later, the women to whom they were betrothed had also become Christians and were dedicated to virginity.

Augustine was more moved than he had ever been in his life—especially by the thought of young brides committing to chastity. It seemed to him at last that he was being compelled to confront himself, seeing himself foul, crooked, and defiled with the habit of lechery, and now there must be an end to it.

When Pontitian was gone, Augustine turned to Alypius. "What is the matter with us?" he exclaimed. "Yes, what is it? Didn't you hear? Simple men take heaven by violence, but we, heartless and learned, see how we wallow in flesh and blood! Are we ashamed to follow because others have gone before, and not ashamed not even to follow?"

His mind was on fire. Alypius could hardly recognize him, so changed was his expression, and when Augustine threw himself out of the house, Alypius followed him closely, perhaps afraid he would harm himself.

Resting in the garden, Augustine found himself confronted again with the problem of the will. The old temptations returned, more cunning than ever, until he could bear the presence of Alypius no longer and flung himself weeping out of the garden, finding solitude under a remote fig tree. There he babbled like a child; "How long, how long? Tomorrow and tomorrow? Why not now? Why should there not be an end to my uncleanness now?"

Almost he expected to hear God summoning him out of the clouds, but the voice he heard came from an unknown child, chanting: ***"Tolle, lege"*** ("Take up and read"). For Augustine the words came like an angelic visitation.

No longer weeping, he rose to his feet and ran to the place where Alypius was sitting with the epistles of Paul beside him. Augustine opened the book, and his eyes fell on the verse from the Epistle to the Romans where Paul demands that the servant of Christ should renounce all voluptuous pleasures: "Let us live honorably, as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires" (13:13-14).

He put his finger in the page, calm at last, and with Alypius beside him, he went into the house to tell the story to Monica. She was overjoyed, radiant with exultation, for the dream of her son converted had at last come true.

A vision of momentary brightness

Though Augustine was finally converted and never again lost his faith in God, temptations remained. He had loved "the perishable beauty of the body, the brightness of the light, the soft melody of songs,

the delicious scent of flowers and the limbs made for the embracing of the flesh." His hot blood was not stilled by conversion: like many others, he would have to wait until he was old before the fleshly demon was silenced.

He was the least calm of the saints, the most impetuous, and even after his conversion, he was able to talk about doubt as though he understood the matter well enough. Yet he was sustained by the vision in the garden of momentary brightness, a vision he could never explain away. All he could say was that "it was as though the light of salvation had been poured into my heart."

EYE-OPENING EPISTLES

It's no coincidence that Augustine was reading Paul's letters on the day of his conversion. He would have first studied Paul with the Manichees, who considered the apostle (at least in their excerpts from his writings) an excellent prophet of Mani. Augustine first heard a Christian interpretation from Ambrose, who preached on Paul while Augustine attended his church. Augustine really dove into Paul's words when he was weighing the claims of the Neoplatonists; he dismissed their notions because truths about God's love and grace "came home to me when I read the least of your apostles." Later, Paul's influence dominated much of Augustine's theology, particularly his writings on the Law, original sin, human will, salvation, and eschatology.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 67: St. Augustine: Sinner, Bishop, Saint

Book Review: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

To show how greatly God has changed him, Augustine tells all. What a fifth-century critic might have said.

David F. Wright

Confessiones
Aurelius Augustinus
A.D. 400

This book is something of a first, and its title might mislead later readers. What Augustine has written, a few years after becoming pastor-in-chief of the church at Hippo (in Roman North Africa), is an extended doxology: thankful praise addressed to God.

He begins with quotations from two psalms: "You are great, Lord, and highly to be praised: great is your power, and your wisdom beyond measure." The phraseology and devotional ethos of the Psalter pervade the whole work.

Narrative, however, is central; as Augustine commented later, "The first ten books are written about myself." The last three are searching meditations on themes suggested by early Genesis.

Spiritual and intellectual autobiography on this scale is unprecedented. Augustine openly describes "the good things and the bad things in my life." He confesses much sin and error—but only to magnify the ever-resourceful grace of God.

Augustine is a profound analyst of the restless twistings of the human soul "turned in on itself" in flight from God. Deeper still is his insight into God's tireless pursuit of his wandering spirit.

Confessiones can be read on a number of levels, which should guarantee perennial appeal. It lays out, for example, a canvas of many of the religions and philosophies competing for allegiance on the cusp of the fifth century. Augustine was pulled now this way, now that; he spent much of his twenties with the Manichees (a missionary-minded Gnostic movement of Persian origin), then read the Neo-Platonists before finally joining the Catholic camp.

On another level, ***Confessiones*** sketches an entrancing mother-son relationship. With simple godliness, Monica tenaciously prayed and wept her wayward genius of a son into commitment to Christ and his Church. Once he was safely in the fold, Monica was free to die—after an experience of spiritual ecstasy with Augustine "in the presence of Truth."

Ambrose, the eloquent preacher and heavyweight Christian thinker, also figures prominently. As bishop of Milan, he clinched Augustine's return to the faith he first learned on his mother's knee.

Though the author often conveys vivid immediacy, this is no diary. Augustine is writing from memory, a dozen years or more after the critical years of his conversion and baptism. The narrative thread follows no neat chronological sequence. Augustine writes as a saved sinner, selectively tracing his wanderings in the ways of God.

The book contains stretches of tough theological questioning interspersed with passages of moving tenderness and beauty. At times it echoes the rhythms of the Psalms, almost poetic in its lyricism. Above all it aims to draw others to contemplate in wonder the divine love that would not let Augustine go.

Reviewed by David F. Wright, professor of Patristic and Reformed Christianity at the University of Edinburgh.

In Print

In this excerpt from Book III, Monica has just dreamed that she and Augustine were standing together in fellowship with the divine.

How should she have had this dream unless Your ears had heard her heart, O Good Omnipotent, You who have such care for each one of us as if You had care for him alone, and such care for all as if we were all but one person?

And the same must have been the reason for this too: that when she had told me her vision and I tried to interpret it to mean that she must not despair of one day being as I was, she answered without an instant's hesitation: "No. For it was not said to me where he is, you are, but where you are, he is."

I confess to You, O Lord, that if I remember aright—and I have often spoken of it since—I was more deeply moved by that answer which You gave through my mother—in that she was not disturbed by the false plausibility of my interpretation and so quickly saw what was to be seen (which I certainly had not seen until she said it)—than by the dream itself: by which the joy that was to come to that holy woman so long after was foretold so long before for the relief of her present anguish.

Nine years were to follow in which I lay tossing in the mud of that deep pit and the more heavily. All that time this chaste, god-fearing and sober widow—for such You love—was all the more cheered up with hope. Yet she did not relax her weeping and mourning. She did not cease to pray at every hour and bewail me to You, and her prayers found entry into Your sight. But for all that You allowed me still to toss helplessly in that darkness.

One other answer I remember You gave her in that time. Many such things I pass over, because I am hastening on to the matters which I am more urgently pressed to confess to You, and many I have simply forgotten. But You gave her another assurance by the mouth of Your priest, a certain bishop reared up in the Church and well grounded in Your Scriptures. My mother asked him in his kindness to have some discussion with me, to refute my errors, to unteach me what was evil and teach me what was good, for he often did this when he found such people as it might profit.

He refused, rightly as I have realized since. He told her that I was as yet not ripe for teaching because I was all puffed up with the newness of my heresy and had already upset a number of insufficiently skilled people with certain questions—as she had, in fact, told him.

"But," said he, "let him alone. Only pray to the Lord for him: he will himself discover by reading what his error is and how great his impiety."

The bishop went on to tell her that his mother had been seduced by the Manichees so that as a small child he had been given over to them; and he had not only read practically all their books but had also copied them out; and had found out for himself, with no need for anyone to argue or convince him, that he must leave the sect. And he had left it. When he had told her this, my mother would not be satisfied but urged him with repeated entreaties and floods of tears to see me and discuss with me.

He, losing patience, said: "Go your way; as sure as you live, it is impossible that the son of these tears should perish."

In the conversations we had afterwards, she often said that she had accepted this answer as if it had sounded from heaven.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 67: St. Augustine: Sinner, Bishop, Saint

The Bishop at Work

Augustine saw himself not as a saint, but as a pastor with a job to do.

Bruce L. Shelley

In the tenth book of his ***Confessions***, Augustine tells us that his life as a bishop was a life of sin, and he repents of all the sins of his ministry—all the rancor and conflict, all the failures at love and peace.

A striking example of Augustine's ministerial errors occurred in 423 as he was turning 70. When Antonius, a pastor he had ordained, turned out to be a destructive scoundrel, Augustine offered to retire.

He confessed, "In my haste and lack of due precaution, I have inflicted a tragedy."

The pope, of course, declined the bishop's resignation. But Augustine, having a high view of the church and a low view of human nature, never considered himself to be above reproach. He was not a saint in his own day, but a working pastor committed to caring for his congregation, administering justice, and communicating God's truth.

Pastoral duties

Though Augustine had many administrative obligations as bishop, his first duty was serving God and the Christian community at Hippo. He baptized, catechized, and administered the sacraments to his people. "Thy servants, my brothers," he said of them, "Thy sons, my masters."

Augustine had been a monk before becoming a bishop, and he continued his monastic lifestyle—with significant modifications, such as living in the bishop's house instead of the monastery. A man in his position was expected to show hospitality, and frequent guests would shatter the silence of a monastic community.

In the fourth century, the Christian bishop was an important figure in the Roman world. Because of this, Augustine was particularly concerned with the image he and his fellow clergy presented. So many critics pounced on perceived failings that Augustine once quoted the psalmist's words, "They that sat in the gate spoke against me: and they that drank wine made me their song."

He routinely visited those who needed help. But he adhered to the biblical counsel to visit only widows and the fatherless in their afflictions. He took this as a rule designed to avoid accusations that he cared only for the rich (unlike the clerics Jerome mocked for ingratiating themselves with wealthy old men, "catching their spittle in their hands when they cough"). He also refused all invitations to feasts within his diocese.

Extremely frugal in his personal life, he wore a cloak usually worn by laymen, and he protested when well-meaning persons sent him gifts of costly clothing.

Late in life he remarked, "An expensive robe would embarrass me: it would not suit my profession nor my principles, and it would look strange on these old limbs, with my white hairs."

Though disciplined, Augustine was no slave to his own rules. Once a consecrated virgin named Sapida sent him a tunic made with her own hands. The garment was originally intended for her brother Timothy, but he had died before receiving his sister's present. So Sapida presented the tunic to Augustine, telling him it would be a great comfort for her if he would accept it.

In his thank-you note (which mentioned that he was wearing the tunic), Augustine reminded her that her brother, for whom she had made an earthly garment, was now clothed with an incorruptible robe of immortality.

The judge-pastor

As the Roman Empire became Christianized, church leaders were assigned increasing civic responsibilities. By Augustine's time, Roman law empowered a city's Christian bishop to impose a settlement, by arbitration, on consenting parties.

This ministry of judging was rooted in the apostolic age, specifically in Paul's injunction that Christians should not take legal action against other believers in a court of unbelievers (1 Cor. 6:1-6). The bishop-judge's duty, then, was to sense the need of the moment and move quickly to impose a firm, clear settlement based on Christian principles.

Augustine's reputation for fairness brought many litigants—pagans, heretics, and Christians. On occasion he would skip all his meals in order to settle the cases before him that day.

Some situations pitted the principles of justice and mercy against each other. In 408 at Calama, where Augustine's friend Possidius was bishop, local pagans staged two riots. They raided the deacon's lodgings, killed a monk in the street, and went looking for Possidius, who heard from his hiding place, "Where's the bishop? If we don't get him, we'll have wasted our time!"

Peace officers did nothing to stop the violence and looting. But when the rebels came to their senses, they realized how serious their acts were. So when Augustine came to Calama a bit later to visit Possidius, a group approached him, begging him to intercede for them.

Nectarius, a respectable pagan in the group, wrote to Augustine urging him to use his influence so that extreme penalties (torture and execution) could be avoided. Nectarius admitted that the rioters should be punished, but it is not for a bishop, he argued, to seek anything but the welfare of individuals and to obtain pardon from omnipotent God for the offenses of others.

Augustine replied that, while he had no desire to see anyone tortured or executed, he did wish to see justice served. Also, as similar acts of terrorism (perpetrated by both pagans and heretics) were on the rise throughout the empire, he hoped the Calama case would serve as an example to other would-be rioters.

After eight months of inaction, the government imposed heavy penalties on the pagans, though not the death penalty.

Nectarius again appealed to Augustine, asking for a general pardon because "as the Stoics were in the habit of saying, all sins were equally great," and no one deserved special censure. This Augustine would not endorse, and he removed himself from the matter.

Two-way communicator

With his training in rhetoric, Augustine was not entirely out of place in a court of law. But he felt most at

home in the pulpit.

His relationship with his congregation was remarkable. His conversational style was laced with questions tossed to his listeners, and he frequently elicited applause or some vocal response from them. Sensitivity trumped classical structure: Augustine, who always used "we" when addressing his listeners, said, "It is better that we should ... be understood by you than be artists in speech and talk past you."

Though many of Augustine's sermons were preserved, they were transcribed from his speaking, not written beforehand. He spoke from rough notes at most, and sometimes not even those; if the lector accidentally read the wrong Scripture, Augustine was known to ignore his prepared message and speak ***ex tempore*** instead.

"In these circumstances I prefer to conform to the error of the lector and the will of God rather than to follow my own," he said.

He always watched for tangible evidence of the power of the living Word in his audience. He knew he had touched hearts when he saw tears. If they seemed bored, he might quickly change subjects or stop speaking altogether.

The preacher tested

Augustine's most challenging preaching came during the fall of Rome, as fear and despair descended on the people of Hippo.

When the news broke, 56-year-old Augustine was following doctor's orders and convalescing at a country estate. His first response was to write to Hippo and urge the other ministers and the people not to waste their time grieving but to give aid to the steady stream of refugees.

The North Africans welcomed the threadbare refugees descending from the ships and heard them tell the horrors of the invasion—palaces burnt, spacious gardens in ruins, rich men hunted like wild beasts. The Romans living in North Africa soon joined the chorus from Rome: Why? Why? Why?

In response Augustine preached that the Lord God had not forgotten his people. Far from it. He had in fact had a hand in the catastrophe at Rome, as the Great Tester of Faith.

The Roman world, he explained, was like a furnace in which God burns like a fire to consume the straw while enriching and purifying the gold. Augustine even dared to attack the people's widespread murmuring against God for the trouble they had experienced.

"Was it the purpose of the Apostles' ***memoriae*** to safeguard your idiotic theaters?" he asked. "Did Peter die and was his body buried in Rome so that not a stone of your theaters should be displaced?"

The people resisted his words. Some told him to "keep off the subject of Rome."

Then his messages turned somewhat defensive. "Vent your anger against me if you will," he said. "However deeply we may be moved, we shall not curse you back, and if we are slandered by you, we shall only pray for you the more."

To make sense of suffering on a scale that had taken his congregation by complete surprise, the great North African turned to a familiar local image: the olive press.

All through the summer, the olives hung on branches that waved in the breeze. Then at the end of the year, they would be beaten down and crushed in the oil presses. So, Augustine preached, "Now is the end of the year. Now is the time to be pressed."

But he saw more than destruction in the events of 410. He knew that pressing was a process that aimed at positive results. Through it, good oil was set free to run into the vats. The world reels under crushing blows, he preached, the flesh is pressed, and the spirit turns to clear, flowing oil.

Augustine had felt that purifying pressure in his own life, and he extended its work to his congregation. Yet a pastor's duty was not just pressing down—it was an enormously complex role.

He described a pastor's job this way: "Disturbers are to be rebuked, the low spirited to be encouraged, the infirm to be supported, objectors confuted, the treacherous guarded against, the unskilled taught, the lazy aroused, the contentious restrained, the haughty repressed, litigants pacified, the poor relieved, the oppressed liberated, the good approved, the evil borne with, and all are to be loved."

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 67: St. Augustine: Sinner, Bishop, Saint

A Tale of Two Cities

It's a shame about Rome, but wait—there's more! What a fifth-century critic might have said.

Martin A. Marty

De Civitate Dei
Aurelius Augustinus
A.D. 426

This book on "the City of God" should find a ready readership despite its heft—1,500 pages. This is a book "for the ages," but never more relevant than now.

It is a wonder that bestselling author (***Confessiones***) Bishop Augustine found time to work on this monument, the latest of his nearly 1,000 titles. And he accomplished all this while conscientiously attending to pastoral duties in the busy African port city of Hippo, a place crowded with refugees since Rome was sacked in 410!

That trauma in Rome hit Augustine so hard that he's been working on his response for over 13 years. The result is both impassioned and literate. The author, well-schooled in rhetoric, cites the major Roman authors along with Christian Scriptures as he displays both the zeal of the convert and the evidence of long hours in the study.

These may be "post-pagan" times, but pagan authors got a second wind after inhaling the smoke of burning Rome. Christian residents of the Eternal City are blamed for its decline and fall. Augustine ably defends the faith amid these attacks.

Augustine's device is to divide reality into two realms, the temporal (or earthly) city and the heavenly. Expect many misreadings. This is not an outline for how to separate or unite "church" and "state," nor does it call for Christians to set up a distinct domain—call it "Christendom." (If things go wrong with such a setup, expect dark ages ahead.)

So what is this tome about? It is about love for the best things in the temporal city mixed with expressions of sorrow and sometimes fury over what goes wrong in it. Augustine is, after all, an expert on human sins, having experimented with more than a few in his youth.

A consistent theme in the book shows up in the author's analysis of polytheism in Roman paganism. Under different names throughout history, "many gods" have challenged the heart of the true God more than have any patterns of mere skepticism.

Though casual readers may find it pessimistic (it's definitely not utopian), this is a book of realistic hope. The grand theme is glory, the glory of the Eternal City that has foundations. People need this testimony of hope that speaks of rising after decline and fall in Rome or anywhere, anytime.

Reviewed by Martin A. Marty, professor emeritus of the University of Chicago.

In Print

In Book V, the author contrasts Rome's lost glory with God's true blessings:

The martyrs followed in the steps of the apostles. They did not inflict suffering on themselves, but they endured what was inflicted on them; and in so doing they surpassed the Scaevolas, the Curtii, and the Decii [Roman heroes who risked their lives for the empire] by their true virtue, springing from true devotion, and by their countless multitude.

Those Roman heroes belonged to an earthly city, and the aim set before them, in all their acts of duty for her, was the safety of their country, and a kingdom not in heaven, but on earth; not in life eternal, but in the process where the dying pass away and are succeeded by those who will die in their turn. What else was there for them to love save glory? For, through glory, they desired to have a kind of life after death on the lips of those who praised them.

To such men as these God was not going to give eternal life with his angels in his own Heavenly City, the City to which true religion leads, which renders the supreme worship (the Greek word for it is ***latreia***) only to the one true God. If God had not granted to them the earthly glory of an empire which surpassed all others, they would have received no reward for the good qualities, the virtues, that is, by means of which they labored to attain that great glory. When such men do anything good, their sole motive is the hope of receiving glory from their fellow-men; and the Lord refers to them when he says, "I tell you in truth, they have received their reward in full." They took no account of their own material interests compared with the common good, that is the commonwealth and the public purse; they resisted the temptations of avarice; they acted for their country's well-being with disinterested concern; they were guilty of no offense against the law; they succumbed to no sensual indulgence. By such immaculate conduct they labored toward honors, power and glory, by what they took to be the true way. And they were honored in almost all nations; they imposed their laws on many peoples; and today they enjoy renown in the history and literature of nearly all races. They have no reason to complain of the justice of God, the supreme and true. "They have received their reward in full."

Very different is the reward of the saints. Here below they endure obloquy for the City of God, which is hateful to the lovers of this world. That City is eternal; no one is born there, because no one dies. There is the true felicity, which is no goddess, but the gift of God. From there we have received the pledge of our faith, in that we sigh for her beauty while on our pilgrimage. In that City the sun does not rise "on the good and on the evil"; the "sun of righteousness" spreads its light only on the good; there the public treasury needs no great efforts for its enrichment at the cost of private property; for there the common stock is the treasury of truth.

But more than this; the Roman Empire was not extended and did not attain to glory in men's eyes simply for this, that men of this stamp should be accorded this kind of reward. It had this further purpose, that the citizens of that Eternal City, in the days of their pilgrimage, should fix their eyes steadily and soberly on those examples and observe what love they should have toward the City on high, in view of life eternal, if the earthly city had received such devotion from her citizens, in their hope of glory in the sight of men.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 67: St. Augustine: Sinner, Bishop, Saint

Augustine & the Battle for Orthodoxy: Christian History Timeline

A Christian History Timeline

Augustine's Life

354 Born at Thagaste, North Africa

361 Experiences serious illness while in grammar school

370 Studies rhetoric in Carthage, takes a mistress

c. 371 Father dies; son Adeodatus is born

c. 372 Becomes a Manichee

376 Teaches rhetoric in Carthage

383 Sails to Rome despite Monica's objections, becomes disillusioned with Manicheism

384 Meets Symmachus, who appoints him official orator in Milan

386 Converts to Christianity

387 Baptized by Ambrose; Monica dies

388 Establishes monastic community in Thagaste

390 Adeodatus dies

391 Ordained a priest in Hippo

392 Requests biblical commentaries from Jerome, debates Fortunatus the Manichee

c. 395 Succeeds Valerius as bishop of Hippo

397 Participates in Councils of Carthage, which defined the structure of the African church

400 Writes ***Confessions***

c. 411 Attends ***Collatio*** (debates ending in the condemnation of the Donatists)

412 Starts 13-year work on ***City of God***

416 At a council in Milevis, joins in condemnation of Pelagius and Celestius

419 Begins writing against Julian of Eclanum

423 Considers resigning over scandal involving Antoninus, whom he had ordained

426 Begins ***Retractions***

430 Dies, as Vandals besiege Hippo

The Church and Its Struggles

354 John Chrysostom born

355 Donatus, schismatic bishop of Casa Nigrae, dies

356 Antony of Egypt dies

361 Valentian, an orthodox believer, becomes Western emperor, ending 30 years of rule by Arians (who believe Jesus is not divine)

373 Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, dies

374 Ambrose becomes bishop of Milan

381 Council of Constantinople affirms Nicene orthodoxy; Emperor Theodosius forbids paganism

384 Symmachus petitions for the pagan Altar of Victory; Ambrose responds and ultimately prevails

385 Jerome goes to Palestine

386 Basilicas in Milan besieged; purge of Manichees in Carthage

390 Ambrose requires Emperor Theodosius to repent for massacre at Thessalonica

c. 390 Pelagius arrives in Rome and is disturbed by immorality

395 Augustine's friend Alypius elected bishop of Thagaste

397 Ambrose dies

401 Donatist bishop of Calama held responsible for attack on Catholic bishop Possidius

405 ***Edict of Unity*** issued against Donatists

407 John Chrysostom, twice deposed bishop of Constantinople, dies

410 Alaric (an Arian) and the Goths sack Rome

415 Synod at Diospolis judges Pelagius favorably

418 Zosimus, bishop of Rome, condemns Pelagius and Celestius; first schism between Rome and Constantinople occurs

419 Julian of Eclanum begins writing in defense of Pelagianism

420 Jerome dies

429 Vandals enter Africa

431 Council of Ephesus condemns Pelagianism

CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 67: St. Augustine: Sinner, Bishop, Saint

Fighting Words

Forged in the heat of theological battle, Augustine's five most distinctive teachings remain controversial.

Roger E. Olson

Despite Augustine's long and dominating shadow over 1,500 years of Western church history, his central ideas have not been universally accepted or uniformly interpreted. The Eastern Orthodox regard some of Augustine's key ideas as pernicious, if not heretical. Anabaptists have rejected much of his theology, while Protestants in general claim selected teachings and ignore others.

Nonetheless, Augustine is widely regarded as the church's most influential philosopher and theologian. His five central ideas were forged in the heat of theological conflict, and they remain controversial today:

1. The nature and source of evil.
2. The nature of the church and its sacraments.
3. Original sin.
4. The relationship of grace and free will.
5. Predestination.

Augustine refined each of these doctrines as he battled what he believed were heresies, or at least false worldviews: a dualistic "cult" known as the Manichees, a Christian sect in North Africa known as the Donatists, and the beliefs of a British monk named Pelagius and his followers. Augustine's distinctive teachings are essentially answers to these theological enemies.

Evil nothings

One of the most pressing theological problems in Augustine's time was how to justify belief in an omnipotent and perfectly good Creator when sin and evil were obviously deeply woven into the created beings.

The Manichees taught that two eternal beings control the universe, one of them good and the other evil. Even if the all-good deity is superior, they argued, it cannot at present conquer or control the evil one. The Manichees also taught that evil is intrinsically associated with matter and that only spirit is good. Thus, the good deity created spirits but not matter.

Against this double dualism (reminiscent of both Zoroastrianism and Gnosticism), Augustine developed an idea he believed was consistent with biblical revelation and the best of philosophy: evil is not some "thing" or "substance" but only the privation of the good (***privatio boni***). It is to goodness what darkness is to light.

The source of evil, then, is not God's creation (how could God create "non-being"?) but the misuse of human free will. According to Augustine, evil "is nothing else than corruption, either of the measure, or the form, or the order that belong to nature." Elsewhere Augustine wrote, "The only evil thing is an evil will."

The vast majority of later Christian thinkers depended on Augustine's "theodicy" (defense of God) to reconcile the reality of evil with God's goodness. Some Christians, though, have found Augustine's concept

of evil insufficient to account for the power and types of evil we experience. Nonetheless, Augustine's response to dualism was largely triumphant over Manicheism.

Church as a mixed bag

Augustine also fought with the Donatists, especially their perfectionist theology of the church.

Donatists believed the grace of God could be found only in an undefiled church, and since they restricted their membership to those they believed to be true saints, they believed they had a monopoly on grace. Thus they considered only their baptism and Lord's Supper valid.

Augustine, however, argued that the church is both universal (not limited to a particular branch) and mixed (some members saved, others not). Only God can know definitely which baptized persons are truly regenerate. Augustine accused the Donatists of a sin worse than condoning impurity: dividing the church.

Augustine and the Donatists also differed on the qualifications of priests. Donatist priests had to be morally pure; specifically they must not have lapsed during Roman persecution. Augustine, like his North African predecessor Cyprian of Carthage, based priestly authority not on irreproachable behavior but on the criterion of apostolic succession—Jesus' disciples laid hands on the next generation of leaders, who laid hands on the next, and so on.

Augustine contended that God's saving grace was conveyed ***ex opere operato***, that is, by Christ himself through his priests ***regardless of their character or beliefs***. If the recipient of the sacrament is not resisting grace, and if the priest performing the sacrament is rightly ordained and in good standing with the Catholic church, grace is conveyed. The human priest is merely Christ's extended hand in the sacrament.

"What these [priests] administer," wrote one Augustine scholar, "is the baptism of Christ, whose sanctity cannot be corrupted by unworthy ministers, any more than the light of the sun is corrupted by shining through a sewer."

Augustine's ideas became the Catholic church's bulwarks against all forms of sectarian and schismatic reform. Even the "magisterial" reformers (Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, Cranmer) accepted most of Augustine's answers to Donatism, though they all rejected ***ex opere operato***, arguing that recipients of the Eucharist must have faith for grace to be effective. The Anabaptists, on the other hand, rejected these ideas and repeated Donatism's insistence on a pure, or at least regenerate, church.

Of human bondage

Augustine's notions of original sin, grace and free will, and predestination are inextricably bound together, and they were shaped by his debates with the Pelagians.

Augustine believed that humankind suffers from original sin, meaning that since the fall of Adam, we are depraved—incapable of doing good without supernatural help. The commands of God to do good were given, Augustine concluded, simply to point out our inability and throw us on the mercy of God.

Pelagius, however, believed that if God commands us to live good and even morally perfect lives, he must give us the ability to obey ***without any special, supernatural assistance***. Thus Pelagians denied there was any "original sin" or "depravity." Instead of being "depraved," the only disadvantage we currently have is that, living in a sinful world, we are more likely to develop sinful habits. Sin is a social disease, not an inherited spiritual-genetic defect.

Thus, Pelagius concluded, we are capable of living sinless lives simply by exercising our wills for the good. "A man can be without sin and keep the commandments of God, if he wishes," he wrote, "for this ability has been given to him by God."

Augustine was more outraged by Pelagius than by any other rival, and in response, he argued even more forcefully that we are born condemned for Adam's sin and incapable of not sinning.

"A man's free will," he wrote against Pelagius, "avails for nothing except to sin." Only the supernatural power of God's grace, imparted through baptism, could heal the deadly wound of sin upon the human soul. (Hence the need for infant baptism—to heal that wound immediately.)

Furthermore, only the power of God's grace could restore in some measure the free will lost in the fall of Adam's race. Grace cannot be received by an act of human will or even cooperated with (synergism)—it must be given as a gift.

"The Spirit of grace therefore causes us to have faith," he wrote, "in order that through faith we may, upon praying for it, obtain the ability to do what we are commanded."

The chosen few

Why do only some receive this gift of faith? In ***On the Predestination of the Saints***, written not long before he died, Augustine concluded that God simply chooses some persons out of the mass of fallen humanity to save and leaves others to their deserved condemnation. The reason some are so graced and others passed over lies only in "the hidden determinations of God."

The basic outlines of what later came to be known as "Calvinism" are found in Augustine's later anti-Pelagian writings. The Catholic church appropriated some of these ideas, such as inherited guilt (though not total depravity) and the absolute necessity of supernatural grace for meritorious works of righteousness. However, Catholic theology by and large passed over Augustine's doctrine of predestination in favor of an emphasis on human cooperation with grace after baptism.

Wycliffe, Luther, Calvin, and other reformers reaffirmed Augustine's doctrine of predestination, inherited depravity, and the sovereignty of grace—though Anabaptists and other radical reformers rejected the same (but without affirming Pelagianism).

Most theologians define their positions in relation to Augustine's doctrines. Almost all of them can appeal to something in the great North African church father, and almost all of them neglect some aspects of his teaching in favor of others. But no one after him can ignore him. Augustine's teachings on these and other controversial subjects have determined much of the agenda for Christian theology for a millennium and a half.

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Influencing the Influencers

Martin Luther refers to Augustine more often than to any other theologian, echoing, for example, his gloomy view of human will: "Where reason is in error and the will turned away, what good can man attempt or perform?" But Luther felt he had moved beyond Augustine on the matter of justification: "In the beginning I devoured Augustine, but when the door into Paul swung open and I knew what justification by faith really was, then it was out with him."

Thomas Aquinas cited Augustine when defending his views on original sin and infant baptism: "According to the Catholic Faith we are bound to hold that the first sin of the first man is transmitted to his descendants, by way of origin. For this reason children are taken to be baptized soon after their birth, to show that they have to be washed from some uncleanness. The contrary is part of the Pelagian heresy, as is clear from Augustine in many of his books."

John Calvin, when accused by the Roman Catholic church of theological innovation, argued that he was instead hearkening back to Augustine: "Augustine is so completely of our persuasion, that if I should have to make written profession, it would be quite enough to present a composition made up entirely of excerpts from his writings."

When English Reformer **Thomas Cranmer** commissioned a portrait of himself from Gerlach Flicke, he had a copy of Augustine's ***De Fide et Operibus*** ("On Faith and Works") painted on the table in front of him. In Cranmer's personal copy of the book, he had underlined the phrase "a good life is indeed inseparable from faith."

Anabaptist leader **Menno Simons** disagreed with Augustine on many things, including church leadership, the nature of Christian community, and infant baptism. In fact, he dismissed any influence when he wrote that if Augustine and other church fathers could support their teaching "with the Word and command of God, we will admit that they are right. If not, then it is a doctrine of men and accursed according to the Scriptures."

CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 67: St. Augustine: Sinner, Bishop, Saint

Semi-Augustinians

A few monks—and eventually most of the church—found both Augustine and Pelagius a little too extreme.

David Allen

The verbal battle between Augustine and Pelagius raged for a full 25 years before the final condemnation of the latter's views at the Council of Ephesus in 431. Though Augustine's views triumphed, not everyone was happy with the outcome.

In Provence, an area of southern France, a group of monks who had all spent time in the important monastery on the Isle of Lérins (opposite the modern resort of Cannes) set about correcting what they saw as the extremism of both Pelagius and Augustine.

John Cassian (360-433), while visiting Egypt to learn spiritual secrets from its famed monks and hermits, heard this from a wizened monk named Chaeremon: "The grace of God always cooperates with our will for its advantage ... and sometimes requires and looks for some effort of good will from it that it may not appear to confer its gifts on the sluggish."

This is the earliest expression of what came to be known as Semi-Pelagianism—a view that Cassian embraced and later began to propagate. The key word is cooperation: no one can save himself but, by cooperating with the grace of God, salvation can be appropriated by anyone.

Cassian clearly felt that Augustine's stress on predestination ruled out any need for human cooperation or consent. Cassian also disagreed with Augustine on the capabilities of the human will, especially after salvation. "When God for any wise reason—discipline, for example—withdraws grace," Cassian wrote, "the will is able to hold on for some time awaiting its restoration."

Cassian's misgivings were shared by Vincent of Lérins (died 450). In his ***Commonitorium***, Vincent catalogued heresies and dangerous theological innovations, and he also listed an "honor roll" of theologians, teachers, and bishops who had, in Vincent's opinion, made significant contributions to the defense and spreading of the Gospel. Augustine's name does not appear on that list.

Furthermore, Vincent makes the point that even "eminent men are sometimes permitted by God to become authors of novelties in the Church." Many scholars interpret the omission of Augustine's name and the reference to "eminent men" as an indication that Vincent disapproved of Augustine's distinctive teaching.

Arguably the greatest of the so-called Semi-Pelagians was Faustus of Riez (died 495), also from Provence. Faustus, a theologian and popular preacher, felt strongly that Pelagius and Augustine had both gotten it wrong. Pelagius stressed human effort and responsibility to the exclusion of God's grace, but Augustine's idea of predestination "jeopardizes God's justice and mercy."

Faustus, in his ***De Gratia Dei*** ("Concerning the Grace of God"), argues that though the Fall made all of us weak and sickly of will, we still possess the ability—and responsibility—to turn to God. Once we turn to God, then he steps in and adds the vital and crucial gift of grace. Faustus is thus close to Augustine in regard to the effects of the Fall but nearer to Pelagius in terms of human ability and responsibility.

The views of these Semi-Pelagians—they could just as easily have been labeled Semi-Augustinians—were not appreciated by Augustine's many friends and supporters.

Caesarius of Arles (c. 470-542), a forceful Augustinian who believed all good works begin with God, "no merit of ours preceding," presided over the Synod of Orange (529), which condemned Semi-Pelagianism. However, even the synod backed away from some of Augustine's more extreme views: his belief that God's grace cannot be resisted and his severe interpretation of predestination were quietly dropped.

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 67: St. Augustine: Sinner, Bishop, Saint

Augustine & the Battle for Orthodoxy: A Gallery of Influential Antagonists

Augustine's life and ministry were shaped by his encounters with these intellectual adversaries.

J. Stepehn Lang

Symmachus
(c. 345-c. 402)
Augustine's pagan patron

Quintus Aurelius Symmachus, Roman prefect, was everything Rome admired: wealthy, eloquent, a born leader. He was also a dedicated pagan at a time when paganism was on the wane.

The Roman empire at this time tolerated paganism, but Christianity was clearly the rising star among religions. Symmachus, a conservative aristocrat, tried to fight this trend, but he was outmaneuvered by his powerful cousin: Ambrose, bishop of Milan.

Ambrose persuaded the Roman emperor Gratian to remove the Altar of Victory from the Roman senate chamber—an obvious slap at Rome's pagan past. The senate sent Symmachus to plead with the emperor to replace the altar. Though eloquent (his style evoked comparisons with Cicero and Pliny), Symmachus failed in his mission.

Symmachus's clout was sufficient, however, to give Augustine's career an early boost. In 384 a government position as teacher of rhetoric in Milan was open, and some of Augustine's Manichee friends told Symmachus of the eloquent young teacher. "Symmachus ... set me a test to satisfy himself of my abilities," Augustine recalled, and the young rhetorician won the post easily.

While in Milan Augustine came under the influence of Ambrose, which put him at odds with his former benefactor. However, no real conflict materialized because the two never met again after 384.

Petilian
(died c. 415)
Defender of the "pure" church

Petilian could have been remembered as a lawyer and bishop of Cirta, but instead he is known as a chief advocate for Donatism—and a major opponent of Augustine.

Donatists believed that the church's holiness was dependent on purity; sacraments administered by impure clergy (especially those who had buckled under persecution) didn't count. In contrast, Catholics stressed the church's unity, and because the Donatists sought to separate themselves from other "tainted" Christians, Augustine and others felt they must be stopped.

Petilian and Augustine traded barbs in several public letters. In ***Epistle to the Elders*** in 400, Petilian claimed that the Donatists were the true church. He threw Augustine's pre-Christian past in his face, calling him "priest of the Manichees," conjurer, and adulterer (for his years with a concubine).

Augustine, in ***Against the Letters of Petilian***, countered that, until the end of history, "The time will not come for the church as a whole when it will be utterly without spot or wrinkle." In the meantime, it is the job of "constant, diligent, and prudent ministers of Christ" to excommunicate immoral priests. Therefore, there was no excuse for "the enemies of Christian unity throughout the world" to perpetuate the schism.

In 411, at a council held in Carthage, Petilian spoke long and eloquently to defend Donatism. When his side was clearly losing, he tried to have the council adjourn, claiming he had a sore throat (which was probably true).

Soon afterward, Donatism was officially outlawed, but Petilian worked to keep the movement united. He disappeared from the scene after 415.

Pelagius
(c. 350-c. 425)
Optimistic moralist

Pelagius, a large man of athletic build, was Celtic-British by birth and became a popular teacher in Rome in the late fourth century. A moralist, he was deeply concerned with Christians' actions and worried that a pessimistic view of human nature might discourage people from attempting to behave rightly.

He was particularly distressed by Augustine's prayer, "Command what you will, and give what you command," as this seemed to reduce humanity to a race of puppets. Pelagius insisted that humans have a free will and are thus responsible to make good choices; grace is bestowed "to make the fulfillment of God's commands easier."

Pelagius was actually less "Pelagian" than his followers, for he never wrote that free will equaled autonomy. He did, however, deny two of Augustine's central doctrines—original sin and predestination—and he believed that "a man can, if he will, observe God's commandments without sinning."

Augustine was certain that both Scripture and his own experience showed sinlessness to be impossible. He and his fellow African bishops kept fighting Pelagianism even after other church leaders, including the bishop of Rome and a 415 synod in Diospolis, heard Pelagius and declared his faith essentially sound.

The Council of Ephesus, affirming earlier decisions, finally condemned Pelagianism in 431, one year after Augustine's death and many years after Pelagius had retreated to a wandering life in the East.

Julian of Eclanum
(c. 380-c. 454)
Pernicious Pelagian

A son and son-in-law of bishops, Julian succeeded his father Memorius as bishop of Eclanum, Italy. His father was an old friend of Augustine, and when Julian was made a deacon in 408, Augustine invited him for a visit. But when Julian joined the Pelagians, he and Augustine became bitter enemies.

Julian began to follow Pelagius when the latter's ideas were considered liberal, yet not beyond the realm of orthodoxy.

Like other Pelagians, Julian believed the doctrine of original sin started with Augustine, not the Bible. He also thought Augustine took a far too negative view of marriage, marital sex, and children—a view bordering on Gnosticism.

But Julian took Pelagius's ideas further, declaring that man's free will made him completely independent of God ("***a deo emancipatus homo est***"). This caused both Julian and Pelagianism to be declared heretical.

Julian lashed out in a dozen books, calling Augustine "the Manichee," "the most stupid of men," and "the detestable Punic quarrel-seeker." Augustine, retaliating with several books of his own, dubbed Julian the "architect of the Pelagian heresy." Yet even while vigorously opposing him, Augustine addressed correspondence to "My dear son Julian."

The quarrel went beyond theology into the personal. Julian accused Augustine of using church funds to cover the costs of heretic hunts and to bribe government officials. He claimed Augustine's mother Monica had been a drunkard in her youth, which angered the bishop.

At the Council of Carthage in 416, over 200 bishops declared Pelagianism heretical. In 418 the new bishop of Rome, Zosimus (who had decided in Pelagius's favor twice before), sided with the council and, in accordance with the decision of an imperial court at Ravenna, condemned the Pelagians.

Julian and 18 other bishops refused to subscribe to Zosimus's decree, so they too were condemned. Julian took refuge in the East, where he continued writing in support of Pelagianism.

Julian is supposed to have died in Sicily around 454 after giving all his goods away to aid the poor during a famine.

Jerome
(c.347-420)
Hyper-sensitive scholar

You are a Ciceronian, not a Christian," Jerome was once warned in a dream. Chastened, he moderated his passion for Latin classics and devoted himself to becoming the greatest biblical scholar of his age. His mastery of Latin (and Greek and Hebrew) came in handy when he translated the Vulgate—the Bible that became the church's standard for a millennium.

Both Augustine and Jerome were in Rome around 383, but they never met. Augustine moved on to Hippo; Jerome was expelled from Rome for being too controversial. He eventually settled at a monastery in Bethlehem. Their acquaintance began in 394 with a lengthy letter exchange that, unfortunately, generated more heat than warmth.

First Augustine raised some questions about Jerome's translations and commentaries. Jerome, famously sensitive and contentious, did not appreciate the critique. Their exchange soon became a spectacle, with both correspondents pecking at the other's reasoning and theological perception. Jerome lamented that the world should "see us quarreling like children."

Eventually both men wished the bickering to end, but neither would back down or apologize. Jerome finally proposed that they could "play together harmlessly in the fields of the Scriptures," but Augustine would have none of it. "As for me, I prefer to do things in earnest, not to 'play,'" he wrote. "If you chose the word to imply that what we do is easy exercise, then let me tell you frankly that I expected more of you."

Around 416, the two giants of the faith reconciled over a common enemy: Pelagianism. That year a gang of hooligans burned down Jerome's monastery, assaulted several men and women, and murdered a deacon. Augustine, like Jerome, assumed the culprits were Pelagians. The two wrote each other and quoted each other in their treatises, presenting a united front against the heresy.

In 418 Jerome wrote Augustine, "Your fame is worldwide. Catholics revere you as the second founder of the ancient faith, and—what is a mark of greater fame—all the heretics hate you." Augustine hailed Jerome as the great author of "ecclesiastical literature in the Latin language."

In the eighth century, Jerome and Augustine were both proclaimed Doctors of the Church.

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 67: St. Augustine: Sinner, Bishop, Saint

What Would Augustine Say?

The fifth-century theologian answers five crucial twenty-first-century questions.

Jay Wood

Sex
God's Blessing or Humanity's Curse?
by W. Jay Wood

I have decided that there is nothing I should avoid so much as marriage," Augustine wrote soon after his conversion. "I know nothing which brings the manly mind down from the heights more than a woman's caresses and that joining of bodies without which one cannot have a wife."

Though today many believe this was Augustine's definitive conclusion about sex, his thinking developed over his lifetime and was more complex than many imagine.

Good marriage

Augustine's views were shaped partly in reaction to his sexually active youth, partly against Platonist philosophy, and partly in response to various heresies he combated throughout his career as a bishop.

At age 17 he began a faithful 13-year relationship with a concubine of lower social status (Roman law forbade marriage between unequal classes), clearly to satisfy his powerful sexual appetites. In the ***Confessions*** Augustine says that while he was sexually active, he felt trapped: "I was bound down by this disease of the flesh. Its deadly pleasures were a chain that I dragged along with me, yet I was afraid to be freed from it."

As a Manichee, Augustine was taught that all sexual relations, even for procreative purposes, were evil and to be avoided. It was in response to the Manichees' prayers that Augustine uttered his own famous prayer, "Lord give me chastity and continence, but not yet."

After his conversion, Augustine was influenced by his mentor, Ambrose, whose ascetic theology was heavily laced with the matter-spirit, soul-body dichotomies characteristic of Neo-Platonism and common to Italy at the time. Ambrose taught, for instance, that Eden and intercourse were incompatible, and that only after the Fall did Adam and Eve surrender their angelic bodies and acquire material bodies.

Thus Augustine's early view of conjugal love.

But Augustine later rejected Manichean Gnosticism as well as the strong Platonism of Ambrose. Not to do so, he thought, would depreciate the doctrines of the Incarnation and the Resurrection, doctrines that assume the essential goodness of bodily existence.

In his ***Literal Commentary on Genesis*** and ***On the Good of Marriage***, Augustine argued that not only did Adam and Eve have material bodies in Eden, but they engaged in intercourse in order to propagate. Also contrary to some assumptions, Augustine denied that intercourse brought about the Fall, though he did teach that original sin is transmitted through intercourse.

Furthermore, Augustine affirmed marriage as the source of three goods: it is (1) a form of human community that makes friendship possible, (2) an appropriate outlet for uncontrollable sexual desires, and (3) a sacrament of inseparable union dissolvable only by death. Because of marriage's sacramental character, Augustine allowed divorce only for adultery and, so long as the former spouse (or, interestingly, the dismissed concubine) lived, he categorically forbade remarriage as a damnable sin.

Married second-class

Augustine nevertheless viewed sex and marriage as inferior to the celibate life, in contrast to Jovian, a fourth-century monk who taught that marriage and celibacy were equal (and whose views were condemned by Ambrose and Pope Siricius).

In ***On Holy Virginity***, Augustine defends the superiority of sexual abstinence. In ***On the Good of Marriage***, he argues that the world is adequately populated—"there is on all sides from out of all nations an overflowing fullness of spiritual kindred"—thus lessening the urgency of God's command to "go forth and multiply." Thus "even they who wish to contract marriage only for the sake of children are to be admonished" to renounce sex in favor of spiritual friendship and the pursuit of God.

His reasoning? Although sexual activity accords with God's original design for humans, it has suffered due to sin and strayed significantly from its divinely intended use. In Paradise, our bodies were entirely subject to the will's bidding. As such, Adam could have commanded his body for sexual purposes merely by a rational act, and children, Augustine writes, would have been generated "by a calm act of the will."

Erotic desires and passions were not part of God's original plan for our sexual lives, as the Pelagian heretic Julian of Eclanum taught, but a consequence of sin. According to Augustine, sin caused a disjunction between our bodies and wills, mirroring the split between God's will and our wills—our bodies no longer obey reason and the will but are moved by lust. Our divided selves are readily seen, he thought, in the sexual dysfunctions we suffer: impotence, frigidity, priapism, premature ejaculation, unwanted nocturnal emissions, and unbidden sexual fantasies. As regards sex, ours is like the condition poignantly described by the Apostle Paul: "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do."

Though Augustine's views came to dominate Western Christian thinking about sexual morality, they contrast sharply with aspects of some contemporary Christian thinking about sex.

On the one hand, his teaching that sexual activity ought to occur only within the bounds of lifelong, monogamous, heterosexual marriage remains the dominant Christian teaching. On the other hand, he would recoil at the permissive stance taken in some Christian circles toward marriage after divorce. No doubt he would also try to convince Christians to remain unencumbered by marriage.

Finally, he would be appalled at much contemporary Christian marriage instruction that we should excite sexual passion and pleasure in our spouses for the sake of recreational sex. The idea that a godly Christian woman would greet her husband at the door draped only in plastic wrap to arouse his sexual ardor would probably occasion yet another anti-heretical treatise.

War
How Good Christians Can Be Good Citizens
Robert L. Holmes

The fall of Rome in 410 was a calamity of staggering proportions to the citizens of the Roman Empire. Civilization itself had been shaken to its foundations.

So it was viewed by Augustine, from his vantage point on the North African coast. But he worried not so much about the empire as about the threat of a backlash to Christianity.

Hadn't critics warned for years that Christians' pacifism would weaken the empire? Didn't this confirm the fears that Christianity was too other-worldly for its followers to be responsible citizens of the state?

Though church and state had worked together for nearly a century (since the conversion of Constantine), Augustine still felt that he needed to establish once and for all that Christians could in conscience assume the full obligations of citizenship, including participation in warfare.

The task was a challenge. Critics seemed to have on their side the teachings of Jesus himself. Though Jesus never talked about war directly, his message of love, humility, and compassion seemed incompatible with violence and killing. And so it was understood by most early Christians.

However, Augustine had already argued (in his attack on the Manichees) that, properly understood, Jesus' teachings did not in all cases call for literal obedience. Of Jesus' injunction, "If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also," Augustine said, "What is here required is not a bodily action, but an inward disposition. The sacred seat of virtue is the heart."

To illustrate this priority of inward motive, Augustine asked readers to consider a man hitting a boy and another man caressing a boy. The first case seems bad, but the man might be a father lovingly disciplining his son; the second case seems good, but the man might be a child molester. Thus, Augustine said, "We find a man by charity made fierce; and by iniquity made winningly gentle."

Because God judges the soul, the ultimate question is not "what the man does ... but with what mind and will he does it." The appropriate motive in all cases, Augustine rules, is love. What is done from love of God must be good.

This opens the door for Christians to perform outward acts that might appear to be forbidden by Scripture. Still, there had to be a rationale for stepping through the door, and Augustine gave that rationale in ***City of God***.

There Augustine insists there is no "private right" to kill. One can kill only under the authority of God, as communicated by direct or implicit command from God, or by a legitimate ruler who carries out God's intent to restrain evil on earth. Augustine further suggests that one who obeys such a command "does not himself 'kill.'" He acts only as an instrument of the one who commands.

Augustine concludes, "The commandment forbidding killing was not broken by those who have waged wars on the authority of God, or those who have imposed the death-penalty on criminals when representing the authority of the state, the justest and most reasonable source of power."

When there is no command by God, war may be waged only by those with legitimate authority, and only for a just cause. Augustine was not, however, specific on what causes can be considered just. He has been interpreted narrowly, as saying states may go to war to avert (defensively) or avenge (offensively) a violation of their rights, or broadly, as saying war may be waged to redress any wrong against God's moral order. Thus Augustine fashioned what is now called the "just war theory," which over the centuries has become a complex set of criteria to govern both the recourse to war in the first place and the conduct of war once begun.

According to this justification, theologian Paul Ramsey contends in ***The Just War***, Christian participation in warfare "was not actually an exception [to the commandment, "You shall not murder"] ... but instead an expression of the Christian understanding of moral and political responsibility."

This understanding has, of course, been challenged from many angles. But with the exception of the "peace churches" (Quakers, Brethren, and Mennonites), mainstream Christianity has stayed to the present day essentially on the course set by Augustine.

Religious Tolerance
The Right Way to Reach the Wrong-Headed
Jeff Winkle

Over the centuries after his death, Augustine acquired quite a reputation for being a stern suppressor of heretical factions. When Elaine Pagels wrote a historical account of original sin in 1988, she blamed him for pushing "laws denying civil rights to non-Catholic Christians; then the imposition of penalties, fines, eviction from public office; and finally, denial of free discussion ... and the use of physical coercion."

Was the bishop really so harsh? While his rhetoric could be venomous, and while he often did support imperial edicts that suppressed dissent, his writings and conduct also reveal an attitude of remarkable tolerance.

Augustine's war against the Manichees, Donatists, and Pelagians was above all a war of words, for he believed that the ideal battle would be confined to debate in the public square and to the page. An admirer of Plato, he seems to have embraced the Socratic ideal that if people are exposed to the truth, they will eagerly pursue it. As Augustine (a master of word play) might have put it, heretics need not be ***convicted but convinced.***

Augustine's views on the power of public debate were tied to his views on conversion. He recognized that a faith worth anything must be chosen freely, not result from force or fear. Thus he famously lashed out against the fire-and-brimstone tactics of the Pelagians: "A man who is afraid of sinning because of Hellfire, is afraid, not of sinning, but of burning."

Early in his career as priest and bishop, Augustine successfully exercised his argumentative skills, honed during his days with the Manichees, for the Catholic cause. In 392 the 38-year-old Augustine challenged Fortunatus, a Manichean priest and former friend, to a debate in a public bath house. After two days Augustine had defeated him so resoundingly that Fortunatus was forced to leave town.

Twelve years later Augustine (by this time a bishop) debated another Manichee, Felix, who then signed a declaration denouncing Mani and was received by Augustine into the church. But when Augustine faced the exhausting challenge of the Donatist schism in the latter part of his career, he was forced to change his tactics. Public debate was useless against opponents who refused to even sit at the same table with Catholics, as this would violate their rules about consorting with "sinners" and compromise their purity. In addition, the Donatists were well aware of Augustine's skill in argument and prudently stayed out of his way.

Unable to lure them into debate, a frustrated Augustine used other strategies. He began to publish a steady stream of vicious—but nonetheless clever—satirical polemics against his opponents, especially harping on the ***circumcelliones***, a small, violent, nomadic faction of the Donatists. He encouraged his own church community to out-do the schismatics at living pure lives. He also wrote pamphlets showing that Donatist beliefs were contradicted by Scripture.

To help make his arguments against Donatist separatism memorable, he composed a 297-verse chant playing off the parables of the comingled catch of fish and of the wheat and chaff:

> ***See church as net, and world as sea***
> ***Saints, sinners in net mingled be***

We sail on to the end of time
Then doom is fixed, what's yours, what's mine.

In 411 Donatist and Catholic bishops met at conference in Carthage to settle the schism once and for all. Augustine quickly established himself as a peacemaker, assuring one Donatist bishop, "God knows I shall take no steps that anyone be forced into joining with Catholics against his will." His oratory during the conference was masterful (despite heckling from the Donatists), and throughout he pleaded with the crowd to forget past quarrels and to focus on their similarities.

After three sessions the Imperial Commissioner Marcellinus (a Catholic himself) ruled that the heresy laws applied to the Donatists. Their churches were confiscated, and they were fined for not attending Catholic churches.

Augustine now found himself torn between the joy of victory and his distaste for confession achieved through coercion. Ever the mediator, Augustine sought a middle ground. He developed what Garry Wills calls a "theory of suppression"; that is, he attempted to justify the edict by means of Scripture. This in itself is remarkable, for Augustine lived in an era when ruling powers needed no such justification.

Employing Luke's parable of the wedding banquet to which outsiders are compelled to come, Augustine argued that some coercion was necessary simply to get heretics into the church. "Let the heretics be drawn from the hedges, be extracted from the thorns," his ***Sermons*** read. "Stuck in the hedges, they do not want to be compelled: 'We will enter when we want to.' But that is not the Lord's command. He said, 'Compel them to come in.' Use compulsion outside, so freedom can arise once they are on the inside."

The battle-weary Augustine became less patient with his opponents as he got older, but he never sought to suppress his enemies without also teaching them. The essence of his stance is illustrated in an episode in 405, following the imperial Edict of Unity, which branded the Donatists as heretics. While several of Augustine's colleagues rushed to jail and killed their rivals, the bishop of Hippo covered the walls of Donatist churches with posters stating the reasonableness of his arguments. Even after the legal battles were won, Augustine never stopped trying to convince his opponents of what he believed to be the truth.

Pluralism
Is Christianity the Only Path to God?
Robert Louis Wilken

In 410 Rome was occupied by hostile forces for the first time in centuries. Pagans blamed the Christian God for failing to protect the city. Augustine countered these charges in ***City of God:*** a book "in which I have taken upon myself the task of defending the glorious City of God against those who prefer their own gods to the Founder of that City."

To frame his argument, the bishop discusses not only Roman religious practices, but also the most sophisticated thinking of its most eminent philosophers: Porphyry and Plotinus, usually called Neo-Platonists.

At the end of the third century, Porphyry had written a book titled ***Philosophy from Oracles***, in which he compiled religious lore from many peoples of the ancient world. Ostensibly he hoped to discover a way of approaching God that was universal, embracing all peoples and times, and not dependent on particular historical events.

Judged on this basis, Christianity (like all other foreign religions Porphyry encountered) failed. How could Christ, he asked, a man who had appeared only late in history, be the universal savior? "What became of the souls of Romans or Latins who were deprived of the grace of Christ which had not yet come until the time of the Caesars?"

Although Porphyry's writings against Christianity were answered by a number of Christian thinkers in the fourth century, his work was still being read at the end of the century. When Augustine began to write City of God at the beginning of the fifth century, Porphyry's defense of traditional Roman religion and his critique of Christianity set the agenda for Augustine's apologetic.

Augustine had great respect for Porphyry and Plotinus. As reported in the ***Confessions***, their books helped Augustine on his journey to Christianity. Their idea of a higher light "on which all depends and to which all look and in which all are and live and think" led Augustine to say that "in spite of your irregular terminology, you Platonists have some kind of an intuition of the goal to which we must strive, however dimly seen through the obscurities of a subtle imagination."

Augustine believed that Porphyry had a glimpse of the "country in which we must find our home," yet because he only "saw it from afar off and with clouded vision," he had lost his way trying to reach it. Porphyry had used the word "grace" and acknowledged that human beings were dependent on God, but he had not "recognized the grace of God through Jesus Christ our Lord." Augustine argued that the noble pagans, like Porphyry and Plotinus, had seen the goal of the quest, the one true God, but had been distracted by the idolatrous practices of their society, in particular the sacrifice of animals to the many gods of the Roman world.

How could a reasonable man like Porphyry, asks Augustine, think that animal sacrifices are pleasing to God? The sacrifice that God desires is "an act that is designed to unite us to God in a holy fellowship," which can only be the sacrifice of ourselves.

What makes Augustine so successful as an apologist is that he sought to understand his opponents, not just make points in an argument. He knew that Porphyry and other intellectuals realized that the only true sacrifice was a spiritual sacrifice of the heart. Hence he shows that the Platonists were inconsistent in defending external sacrifices while claiming to serve the one true God.

In the first paragraph of the ***Confessions*** Augustine had written: "You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you." This is the truth upon which Augustine bases his argument: human beings can only find fulfillment and peace in fellowship with God.

True religion (a phrase Augustine used as a title for an early book) is not simply a matter of tradition, nor a creative response to the mystery of things, nor the zealous pursuit of virtue, nor the cement that binds together the social world. It is an affair of love and fellowship with a God who could be named and was revealed in a particular moment in history.

The ancient critics of Christianity were united in affirming that there is no one way to the divine. On its face this is a beguiling argument, and one often heard today.

By appealing to a particular history, the election of the people of Israel and the sending of Christ into the world, Christian thinkers transgressed the conventions that governed civilized discourse in the ancient world. The starting point of Christian faith was "what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life" (1 John 1:1).

To those who assail Christianity's claims to be both particular and universal, Augustine responds, "This is the right road which leads to the vision of God and to eternal union with him; it is proclaimed and asserted in the truth of the holy Scriptures. And all those who do not believe in it, and therefore fail to understand it, may attack it; they cannot overthrow it."

Signs & Wonders
Miracles Ended Long Ago or Did They?

Bruce L. Shelley

During his pastoral ministry, Augustine came to know a woman in Carthage named Innocentia. A devout woman and highly regarded, she tragically discovered that she had breast cancer.

A skillful physician told her the disease was incurable. She could opt for amputation and possibly prolong her life a little, or she could follow the advice of Hippocrates and do nothing.

Either way, death would not be put off for long. Dismayed by this diagnosis, Augustine reports, "she turned for help to God alone, in prayer." In a dream, Innocentia was told to wait at the baptistry for the first woman who came out after being baptized, and to ask this woman to make the sign of Christ over the cancerous breast.

Innocentia did as she was told, and she was completely cured. When she told her doctor what had happened, he responded with a contemptuous tone, "I thought you would make some great discovery to me!" Then, seeing her horrified look, he backpedaled, saying, "What great thing was it for Christ to heal a cancer? He raised a man who had been dead four days."

This story, reported in ***City of God***, shows how dramatically Augustine had changed his mind on the subject of miracles.

In North Africa in Augustine's day, belief in miracles was as widespread as today's obsession with angels in America. Early in his ministry, Augustine mocked these popular claims. In ***On True Religion***, written in 390, he asserted that miracles like those in the Bible ended in the apostolic era. "These miracles," he wrote, "were no longer permitted to continue in our time, lest the mind should always seek visible things, and the human race should be chilled by the customariness of the very things whose novelty had inflamed them."

But later in Augustine's ministry, some of his colleagues traveled to Jerusalem and returned to North Africa with relics of the body of an apostle. Little chapels called memoriae containing sacred dust sprang up in country estates around Hippo. As biographer Peter Brown puts it, Augustine had to deal with miracles on his own doorstep.

The bishop, who had once scoffed at such folk religion, now found himself preaching to huge crowds drawn by a little bit of dust. He saw the power of the shrines: he knew of a thief in Milan who was compelled to confess his deeds at the tomb of the saints. He needed to modify his earlier, anti-miracle stance.

So Augustine, late in life, decided to examine and record the miracles that he personally encountered and to give the verifiable miracles maximum publicity. In fact, he writes that when he learned Innocentia had not told others about her healing, "I was indignant that so astounding a miracle, performed in so important a city, and on a person far from obscure, should have been kept a secret like this; and I thought it right to admonish her and to speak to her with some sharpness on the matter."

When Innocentia did tell her friends what had happened, "They listened in great amazement and gave praise to God." Augustine's hope was that, as apostolic miracles had aided the growth of the early church, miracles in his own day would draw people to Christianity. Unfortunately, pagans and heretics boasted of miracles, too. Augustine did not deny the pagan miracles, but he likened them to the wonders performed by Pharaoh's magicians, in contrast to the miracles wrought by Moses. Pagan miracles occurred, but as they did not bring glory to the true God, they must be dismissed.

Heretics' miracles, according to Augustine, never happened: "Either they are deceived, or they deceive."

Heretics are incapable of performing miracles because, by their schismatic nature, they show that they have not love, and he who has not love is nothing. If a heretic claims to have performed a miracle, Augustine warned, he is a false prophet, seeking only to lead people away from Christ.

Augustine's exuberance for true miracles in ***City of God*** shows that he no longer saw them as sham spirituality but as physical manifestations of God's work in the world.

He wrote, "What do these miracles attest but the faith which proclaims that Christ rose in the flesh and ascended into heaven with the flesh? ... God may himself perform them by himself, through that wonderful operation of his power whereby, being eternal, he is active in temporal events; or he may effect them through the agency of his servants. ... Be that as it may, they all testify to the faith in which the resurrection to eternal life is proclaimed."

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 67: St. Augustine: Sinner, Bishop, Saint

Augustine & the Battle for Orthodoxy: Recommended Resources

Elesha Coffman

Though Augustine's earthly existence was confined to the fourth and fifth centuries, his influence cannot be confined to any era, church, region, or subject. Consequently, authors (or editors) wishing to publish books about him generally have to choose between detailing his life or exploring his legacy.

Fortunately for those of us working on this issue, ***Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*** (Eerdmans, 1999), dares to do both—and succeeds. Of course, the endeavor required 900 pages and a host of talented contributors, edited by Allan D. Fitzgerald, O.S.A. (who also edits Villanova University's ***Augustinian Studies***). The encyclopedia's entries cover a wide range of topics, making it a terrific starting place for tracing Augustine's thoughts from their origins to some fascinating conclusions.

Also in the broad, life-and-legacy vein is the ***Collectanea Augustiniana*** series (New York: Peter Lang), begun in 1990. The first three volumes focus on Augustine's conversion and baptism, his priestly ordination, and his relationship to Christian mysticism, respectively. The fourth volume, ***Augustine in Iconography***, was particularly useful for this issue, as it gives the history behind famous images of the saint and, in so doing, helps illuminate the details of his life.

Who he was

Obviously, any study of Augustine's life begins with his own Confessions. Next in line is the ***Life of Augustine*** written a few years after the saint's death by his longtime friend Possidius. In trying not to duplicate the autobiography, Possidius summarizes Augustine's early life, then gives a more detailed description of his actions and attitudes as a bishop.

Moving closer to the present, Peter Brown's ***Augustine of Hippo*** (University of California, 1967) stands out as a classic work by an expert historian. A lesser-known book from the same era, Frederik van der Meer's ***Augustine the Bishop*** (Sheed and Ward, 1961), also stands out for its engaging picture of Augustine's daily pastoral routine.

Even more recently, prize-winning historian Garry Wills dug into Augustine's thought life for an intellectual biography titled simply ***Saint Augustine*** (Viking, 1999). Wills describes Augustine as "a tireless seeker, never satisfied" yet also a man who knew his mind could never fully penetrate the mysteries of God.

What he means

Again, a good place to start is Augustine's own words—notably ***City of God***, in which he articulates many foundational ideas of Western society.

Of course, Augustine wasn't forging these ideas in isolation. For setting him in the flow of his tradition, two "oldies" are still golden: J. N. D. Kelly's ***Early Christian Doctrines*** (Harper & Row, 1960) and Jaroslav Pelikan's ***The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition***, 100-600 (volume 1 of ***The Christian Tradition***, University of Chicago, 1971).

Exploring the intersections between Augustine and figures further removed from him in time and space has proven fruitful as well. ***The Augustinian Tradition***, edited by Gareth B. Matthews (University of California, 1999), brings thinkers from Dante to Descartes to Wittgenstein into the dialogue. In ***Christian Doctrine, Christian Identity*** (University Press of America, 1999), Christopher J. Thompson looks to Alasdair MacIntyre, Stanley Hauerwas, and others as he investigates Augustine's influence on ideas of narrative and character.

Additional resources

Online, the Christian Classics Ethereal Library (www.ccel.org) includes many letters of Augustine and other source documents in its Ante-Nicene Fathers collection. Some good information on the Augustinian order and its role in education is available at www.augustinian.villanova.edu.

Another useful multi-media resource is Augustine: Philosopher and Saint, part of the Great Courses on Tape series from The Teaching Company (www.teach12.com). Taught by Eastern College's Phillip Cary, the course is available in audio or video format.