The Sins of Augustine
by Chuck Fisher
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Augustine Aurelius, Bishop of Hippo, arguably is considered the most influential theologian after St. Paul. As a pastor and bishop in North Africa, Augustine was one of the most prolific church writers, dealing with the many theological issues that faced the Church in his day. As a teacher, he influenced the course of the Church, and as a bishop, he influenced the politics of Rome. Without a doubt, Augustine it is considered a great man. But does he deserve this reputation?

Facts

The history of Augustine's life is pretty straightforward and well-known. Son of a pagan father and Christian mother, Augustine grew up knowing the truth of the gospel, but led his own life, his father taking delight in his son's sexual escapades. Augustine became a well-known orator and studied the pagan philosophies of Plato. Augustine became a Christian at age 32, after discussions about Christianity with a friend, and hearing a child's voice telling him to pick up a scroll and read it. This conversion story is one the most famous in Christendom.

After being baptized, in 387, Augustine moved back to his hometown of Tagaste, in North Africa, to found a monastic community and become a monk. In 391, the church at nearby Hippo pressed him to become a priest, and five years later, he was made Bishop of Hippo. As a Church leader, he became an active pastor, not only for his congregation and diocese, but for his Faith. His life is best known for his doctrinal fights against Donatists and the followers of Pelagius.

Perverter of the Church?

Augustine has been called the Great Teacher of the Church, and the Doctor of Grace, because of his influence on the doctrines of the Church. His voice was so powerful that a simple "Augustine Dixit," "Augustine says ," settled all arguments. Augustine is still beloved theologian of theologians, studied in seminaries and schools of philosophy around the world. However, there are a few things that those who sing Augustine's praises neglect to tell us, things which, if widely known, would call into question his supposedly great contributions to philosophy and theology.

First of all, believe it or not, Augustine couldn't read Greek! It is not required, in ministers, that they be able to read Greek. Many, many ministers have been to Bible schools that did not required them to learn Greek. This does not mean that they're not qualified to pastor churches, to preach and teach the gospel. However, for a theologian to not be able to consult the original languages of the Word of God, this is a critical failure.

This means that Augustine was not able to understand what Paul or Peter or John wrote, without relying on the sayso a translator. Which Augustine did. Augustine relied on the translation of his close ally, Jerome of Palestine. Jerome was the man who translated the Bible from the Hebrew and Greek, into Latin. Unfortunately, Jerome was an extremely biased, didactic theologian, and in at least one theological area, that of justification, made an unfortunate translation that has affected the Church ever since. Augustine took a word from Jerome's Latin Vulgate and gave us a Roman court model for justification, rather than the model that Paul presented, in the original Greek, that of a king declaring a subject in right standing with his/her king. Robert Brow, in his article, "Did Paul Teach Law Court Justification?" wrote:

The words in the original Greek might allow, but they never require a judicial interpretation. Since the time of Chrysostom it has been pointed out in the Greek Church that dikaioo could equally well be translated "make upright or righteous" .... If this Greek Orthodox reading of the Epistle is correct then it would seem that it was the legal minds of the first Latin translators and Jerome's Vulgate which introduced the forensic virus into the western church. Augustine did not know Greek, and he set the Roman law court model in stone. Anselm and Calvin clarified that logic with ruthless perfection. http://www.biblical-theology.com/salvation/justific.htm

A second problem with Augustine is where he got much of his theology from. Before becoming a Christian, Augustine studied two different religions/philosophies, that he allowed to influence him, and brought their doctrines with him into the Church.

For nine years, Augustine was a Manichean, a devotee of of the teachings of Mani, founder of a Persian moral cult. Like the Gnostics of the first century, Mani and his followers were dualistic, teaching that the flesh was sinful and impure, while the spirit was light and life. As a Manichean, this teaching was a comfort to Augustine, as it let him blame his continued sexual sin on his lower fleshy nature, but still be moral by emphasizing the separateness of flesh and spirit.

Augustine's years with the Manicheans left its impact on the Church, as he brought this teaching into the the Church through his teaching on Original Sin. A. T. Overstreet, in his on-line book, "Are Men Born Sinners?, The Myth of Original Sin," notes:

Augustine's nine years with them [the Maniceans] accustomed him to regard human nature as essentially evil and human freedom as a delusion. Augustine next fell under the influence of Neo-Platonism, and his theological views were strongly influenced by this philosophy as well. However, his doctrine of sin shows the obvious influence of the Gnostic teachings of Manichaeism, in which he assumes the most ridiculous teaching of all the heathen philosophies the teaching that matter can be sinful. And this is the source of his doctrine that sin can be passed on physically from one person to another.

Harnack says:

We have, finally, in Augustine's doctrine of sin a strong Manichaean and Gnostic element; for Augustine never wholly surmounted Manichaeism.

and...

Augustine's doctrine of sin, with his belief in the inherent sinfulness of the physical constitution, is wholly Manichaean. His idea that sin is propagated through the marriage union, that sexual desire is sin and that sexual lust in procreation transmits sin is also Manichaean. Augustine built his doctrine of original sin upon this premise that sexual lust in procreation transmits sin.

As mentioned in the quote above, Augustine studied the teachings of pagan Greek philosophers, the Neo-Platonists. In fact, Augustine was " converted " to Christianity through Neo-Platonist philosophy! "World Book Encyclopedia" had these two comments to make about the influence of pagan philosophy on Augustine:

"The writings of the Neo-Platonists and sermons of Saint Ambrose, the bishop of Milan, convinced Augustine to accept Christianity. "

and

"Augustine's study of neoplatonism convinced him that God existed in the soul of every human being."

The following is from the "Concise Columbia Encyclopedia" article on Neoplatonism:

"Neoplatonism, ancient mystical philosophy based on the later doctrines of Plato, especially those in the Timaus.... Neoplatonism, widespread until the 7th cent., was an influence on early Christian thinkers (e.g., Origen) and medieval Jewish and Arab philosophers. It was FIRMLY JOINED WITH CHRISTIANITY BY AUGUSTINE, who was a Neoplatonist before his conversion." (emphasis mine)

Did you get that last line? Augustine brought the pagan philosophies, learned before his conversion, into the church and much of our doctrine today is based on this.

What is generally not known about Augustine is that he favored his philosophers more than the Old

Testament revelation. Bishop Ambrose, who was instrumental in converting Augustine, had to help him overcome his problem with the Old Testament : it seems that Augustine felt that the God of the Old Testament was capricious and vindictive, and at odds with the God of the New testament.

So how did Ambrose and Augustine overcome the apparent contradiction ? By using a method of interpretation called allegory. The teachings of the Old Testament, according to Augustine, could only be understood by taking the Old Testament as allegory. Augustine spiritualized the Old Testament, teaching that the histories of the Old Testament had nothing to do with God, in reality, that the stories about God in the Old Testament only taught about God in pictures, like parables. According to Augustine, the Old Testament was not a perfect revelation of God and his character, but contained bits and pieces about God that we had to figure out with allegorical interpretation. Augustine's influence was so great that, for a thousand years, his method of interpreting the Bible was the official method of interpretation used by the Church.

Here is what James J. O'Donnell wrote in his on-line article, "Augustine the African"

Here Christianity began to appear to him in a new, intellectually respectable light. As before, his most pressing personal problem was his sense of evil and his responsibility for the wickedness of his life; with the help of technical vocabulary borrowed from Platonic philosophy Ambrose proposed a convincing solution for Augustine's oldest dilemma. Augustine had besides a specific objection to Christianity that only a professor of belles-lettres could have: he could not love the scriptures because their style was inelegant and barbaric. Here again Ambrose, elegant and far from barbaric, showed Augustine how Christian exegesis could give life and meaning to the sacred texts.

How did Augustine's philosophical background affect Christian doctrine ? His neo-platonic views affected his view of God, which is passed on to the Church, at large.

Augustine bought into the Platonic beliefs about the Perfect Ideal. Plato taught that everything that existed was merely a mirror of the one true thing that was perfection, and this Perfect Ideal was unchangeable. If it could change, it wouldn't be perfect. With that as his philosophical presupposition, Augustine brought in an un-biblical definition about God's immutability that survives as orthodoxy to this day. This is from Chapter Two of Bob Moore's on-line book, "Calvinism -- Ten Little Caveats":

From Plato comes the concept of "the forms" or perfect ideals. This gave students of philosophy (one being Augustine) the notion that God does not change in any way because he is perfect. What is perfect, it is argued, does not change because by definition "perfect" means the level beyond which nothing can exceed. Nothing is more perfect than flawless, A+, or 100%. For a Platonist, things which change are inferior to things which do not change.

The Bible presents God as changeless, but the Christian tradition being shaped by Augustine and others, had to interpret what that meant. They had to decide if it meant that God did not change in character or if it meant that he did not change in some stronger sense.

Don't believe that our Christian orthodox doctrine relies on Greek philosophy? Then read these quotes from "The Providence of God," by Benjamin Writ Farley, as cited in Bob Moore's book:

the rudiments of a reformed doctrine of the providence of God lie deeply embedded in the western philosophical tradition. There is little point in debating this. Wisdom and truth consist in acknowledging the fact and in showing how Christian and later Reformed doctrines differ significantly from the older, inherited, philosophical views.

Farley reflects further,

Has Reformed theology wed itself too closely to the classical world's concepts of God's perfection, omnipotence, omniscience, and immutability in its attempts to witness to the God of Scripture? To be certain, such concepts have their place in guiding the church's reflection on the biblical God of providential activity. They enable the church to avoid the pitfalls of defining God in ways that make him subservient to other

factors in the universe; they call the church's attention to glaring inconsistencies in its assertions about deity. But they need not 'control' our understanding of God's interaction with his world.

A third problem with Augustine that is not discussed often is his tendency to develop doctrine based on his experience rather than scripture. I have heard it said, "A man's philosophy is dictated by his morals." The same is true for his theology. Augustine wrote an autobiography, considered to be a classic, Confessions, and in it, he discusses his problems with sin. He spends a great deal of time dealing with an incident (as a young teenager) in which he stole pears from a neighbor's tree, and uses this event to develop and teach the doctrine of Original Sin.

Because Augustine had a problem with promiscuity and lust, and even as a churchman and bishop, had problems with his thought-life, he concluded that no one is able to choose to do good. His problem with the settings and formed the basis for the doctrine of the other depravity of man. This experiential theology, based on his own moral failures, caused him to attack the Biblical theology of Pelagius and Celestius and Julian of Eclanum, who taught man's responsibility to choose to follow God.

A fourth problem area with Augustine is an area that, while well-known among scholars, is not widely discussed, but is absolutely critical in evaluating the truth of the doctrines that he developed and foisted on the Church. This last area deals with Augustine's method of dealing with those who disagreed with his teachings. Since Augustine's teachings became the touchstone for church doctrine, both Catholic and Protestant, it is vital that we examine the process by which Christian doctrine became settled, and was handed down to us.

Augustine was born in 354, in the time of a Christian Roman empire. Augustine did not have to live through the time of persecution that had been on the Church for 250 years, and so did not know the powerlessness that the meek followers of Christ had experienced. Instead, Augustine came into a Church with politically well-connected bishops, who had direct lines of communications to authorities on all levels, including the Roman Emperor. And Augustine, as a bishop of his time, used his resources well.

Early in Augustine's Christian career, a controversy arose over the views of Donatus. Do not be deceived by classical theologians into thinking that Donatists were heretics. They were not. Instead, Donatists were basically Christians who believed in holiness. Coming out of the time of the great persecution of Diocletian, Donatus and his followers refused to accept the leadership and ministry of priests and bishops who had shown cowardice in the face of persecution. The appointment of a minister who had handed over scriptures to be burned was a rallying cry of the Donatists.

As an opponent to the Donatists, Augustine was a vigorous fighter for the Catholic Church. He weighed in with sermons and writings condemning them, which, given his perspective as a Catholic, is understandable. After all, as Christians, we're called to contend for the faith, and if we believe that people are teaching false doctrines, heresies that endanger the faith of weaker Christians, we're to expose the error and preach the truth. However, Augustine took the fight one step further. Ignoring the lessons of the history of the early Church and its experiences with bitter, angry men who sought to destroy it with persecution, Augustine advocated the persecution of the Donatists.

in Aurelius of Carthage and in Augustine the catholics at last had leaders who were a match for the Donatists. Augustine issued exhaustive historical and theological counter-arguments and a justification of coercion, while Aurelius' organizing ability produced effective action. Yet it took legal sanctions to check Donatism--especially the Edict of Unity (405) and the proscription which followed the convention in Carthage in 411. Eerdman's Handbook to the History of Christianity.

Did you get that? Augustine wrote justifying the legal "coercion" of Christians who disagreed with him. Since when do we resort to legal courts and edicts to decide Christian practice?

It is in the last battle of his life, with the Pelagians that Augustine really distinguished himself as a man willing to use the methods of the world, and not the Bible, to achieve his purposes.

Pelagius, by all accounts (including Augustine's) a godly man, was appalled at Augustine's teaching on Original Sin, and taught differently than Augustine, thus earning Augustine's enmity. He did not believe that all were tainted with the sin of Adam, and opposed Augustine's teachings.

Pelagius also merited the anger of another so-called Father of the Church, Augustine's compatriot, Jerome, who translated the Bible into Latin. It seems that there was a monk whose name was Jovinian, who taught that it was alright for priests to marry, that there was no great virtue in remaining celibate. Jerome, along with Augustine, was one of the leaders of the teaching that married saints were of a lesser class than celibate saints. Jerome was a vicious man, known for his disgusting attacks on opponents, and his characterization of Jovinian was no different. Jerome depicting this saint as a Bacchanalian orgyist. Pelagius took Jerome to task for such a rotten manner of arguing, thus earning the hatred of Jerome.

Finally, Pelagius was a holiness preacher. Living in Rome, he condemned the loose morals of the Emperor's court, thus earning the enmity of Emperor Honorius.

As many did when it looked like the barbarians might overwhelm Rome, Pelagius left Rome for other parts, specifically, Palestine. While living in Palestine, several of Augustine's followers in Palestine brought charges of heresy against Pelagius, and Jerome joined in the accusations.

There were two trials/synods held in Palestine, and at both of these examinations, Pelagius was declared to be orthodox. He was present to defend himself and explain what he taught. Not content to have Palestinian bishops try Pelagius, Augustine had two more trials/synods held to "examine" Pelagius' teachings, both in North Africa, in Augustine's own home town. To no one's great surprise, these two kangaroo courts declared Pelagius to be a heretic. Mind you, these two trials were held in North Africa, under Augustine's direction, and without Pelagius there to defend his teachings.

The results of these four trials were sent to Pope Innocent of Rome, who sided with Augustine. But Innocent had been lobbied hard by Augustine ahead of time. And Pelagius had not had a chance to defend his teachings. Knowing that Augustine was working to have him declared heretical, Pelagius prepared a defense of his teachings and sent it to Rome.

Now, here is the rub. Innocent died before Pelagius' defense arrived, and a new pope was selected, Zosimus. Zosimus received Pelagius' written defense, and after reading the defense, reopened the case. After examining both sides, Zosimus declared Pelagius orthodox. This is not widely known. Pelagius was declared by an impartial bishop to be orthodox in his doctrine.

This gave Augustine and his party fits, and so they decided to enlist a little more help. Remember how Augustine supported using legal force to settle church matters in the matter of the Donatists? Augustine decided to enlist the Emperor in this matter of doctrine. Augustine and his party decided to appeal to Emperor Honorius to join in on this matter of doctrine. In addition, a fellow bishop and friend of Augustine, Alypius, sent a bribe of 80 stallions to Honorius to use his influence on Zosimus. Again, to no one's surprise, the following year, Zosimus bowed to Imperial pressure and declared Pelagius a heretic.

The church, after the death of Augustine and Pelagius, and under the sting of Imperial pressure and Jerome's hatred, went on to declare all of Pelagius' teachings heretical and all of Augustine's as orthodox. It is due to the ungodly efforts of Augustine and his party that we owe the spectacle of church doctrine being decided by political power and chicanery.

Summary

Doing the research we can see that Augustine, far from being a saint, was responsible for much bad theology being introduced into the Church. Because of him, we have the teachings of Gnostics and Pagans masquerading as Christian doctrine. Because of Augustine's appeal to force, we have a Christian history marred with the image of a blood-stained church willing to kill to enforce its positions.