

### Church History, Lesson 10b

(This lesson is based on The Story of Christianity by Justo Gonzalez.)

#### AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO's Theological Legacy

**Ministry at Hippo** - At Hippo the bishop Valerius noticed that Augustine was in the congregation one Sunday and decided to preach about how God provides shepherds for his people. He then instructed his congregation to pray for God's guidance, just in case there was someone in the congregation that very day who was sent by God to shepherd that very congregation!

The congregation responded as Valerius had hoped and Augustine was ordained to serve alongside him. There was a rule that a bishop could not leave his church for another, so this guaranteed that Augustine would remain at the church in Hippo for the rest of his life.

#### Freedom of the Will contra Manicheism

- Augustine's earliest writings were in defense of Christianity against Manicheism. He had led several of his friends to believe in Manicheism and therefore wanted to see them come to Christian faith.
- Manicheism taught that everything was controlled by "fate". Everything, including our own decisions, are all predetermined.
- Augustine argued that decisions made out of our own will and not "coerced by outside circumstances or inner nature" can be considered truly "free". In that sense, Augustine defended the "freedom of the will". This "freedom" will be further defined in his debate against Pelagius.
- This concern with "freedom of the will" was important in Augustine's polemic against Manicheism because it provided an explanation of original evil. Here is Augustine's reasoning:
  - God is good, infinitely good...
  - Everything God created was good. God created the will, therefore it is good... even though that will had the capability to make its own decisions.
  - Such a free will can produce evil.
  - Evil originated in the bad decisions of both human and angelic (demon) wills.
  - In this way, Augustine was able to affirm that evil is real, but that everything that God made was good.

#### Just War Theory – contra Donatism

- Augustine became a bishop in Hippo, in North Africa. This is where the Donatist controversy centered. There were two issues that had to be dealt with.
- First of all, the Donatist believed that if a priest was ordained by an unqualified bishop, that ordination was invalid. This challenged the authority of the collective church. Augustine argued that the rites of the church were valid regardless of the virtue of the person administering them. Augustine argued, along with others in the mainstream church, that if this were not true, everyone would constantly be questioning the validity of their baptism. This is one area where we see Augustine supporting a more "Catholic" doctrine.
- Second, some of the Donatists turned to armed conflict to support their cause. (Remember that there was a cultural conflict between the Donatists who tended to be more rural and indigenous and the official church which tended to be more urban and Roman.) It was in this context that Augustine expounded a "just war theory".

Augustine proposed 3 conditions that must be met for a war to be just:

- The purpose of the war had to be just, such as national self-defense or the defense of others. This meant that wars for territorial expansion were unjust.
- The war had to be waged by a properly instituted authority, in other words a government. Augustine had no idea that this would be used down through the centuries by dictatorial governments.
- The third rule was the most important to Augustine. For a war to be just, even in the midst of all the violence, the motivation had to be love. For example, love for family and freedom meant the willingness to defend them.

## Salvation by GRACE – contra Pelagius

- Augustine's primary contribution to Christian theology was combating the works salvation theology of Pelagius.
- Pelagius was a monk from Britain who saw the Christian life as a constant struggle. Through this struggle one's sins could be overcome and salvation could be attained.

Pelagius agreed with Augustine on some points.

- He believed that God was infinitely good.
  - He believed that God made us free.
  - However, Pelagius interpreted this freedom to mean that the will always had the ability to overcome sin. If this were not true, sin would be excusable.
  - Another way of putting Pelagius' theology would be to say that if God gave us commandments, then we must be capable of keeping them!
  - This is essentially a works based view of salvation.
- Augustine basically combatted this by remembering his own conversion experience. Augustine remembered the conflict in his own soul. At points he seemed to will and not will to become a Christian. But he was powerless to accomplish his own conversion.

In this sense, the human will is in bondage. This is the point at which Augustine refined his understanding of the "freedom of the will". Here are his theological conclusions:

- Before the fall, Adam and Eve were free to sin and free not to sin.
  - Between the fall and our redemption, humans are "free" but only free to sin.
  - After salvation, there is a sense in which the "freedom of the will" is restored. Like Adam and Eve before the fall, Christians are free to sin or not to sin.
  - In heaven, we will be free, but only free not to sin!
  - Augustine is "threading a theological needle" here. He is acknowledging our basic experience of freedom as humans, but he is also expressing the reality that when humanity fell into sin, our wills fell also. We sense an experience of freedom in decision making, but when it comes to "deciding to be good" or "deciding to obey God" we find that our wills are in bondage to sin.
- The way that Augustine applied this to salvation was by saying that God must take the initiative when a person is saved. At the point of conversion, humans do not have the power to decide to believe. God's grace must break the bondage of the will to sin. Therefore, the power of salvation is grace and God is the initiator. This is why these are called "the doctrines of grace".
  - This is in contrast to Pelagius' teaching who taught that each human being has both the power to sin and not sin. He taught the babies have no sin, guilt, or a sinful nature until they personally commit a sin.
  - This controversy lasted several years, but Pelagianism was eventually condemned at the Council of Carthage in 411 AD.

## Primary Writings:

- Confessions of Augustine - The Confessions of Augustine is his spiritual autobiography. It includes profound psychological insight and defends his perspective on salvation by grace.
- The City of God – In The City of God Augustine defends Christianity against the charge that Rome had fallen because it had abandoned its traditional pagan gods. It is in this context that Augustine expounds on the "two kingdom" theology of history.

## The End of an Era:

- In 410 AD the Goths overran Rome. When Augustine died in 430 AD the Vandals were besieging the city of Hippo.
- For centuries the Roman armies had been able to defend the Empire's borders, but now the floodgate were open. The Germanic tribes invaded in waves, sacked towns and villages, and set up their own kingdoms.
- In terms of culture, language, and literature, the church filled the vacuum left by the Empire. This is one of the reasons that the medieval church was so powerful.
- Many of the invading tribes were still pagans and some of them had been "converted" when Arianism was still strong, so the conquered Christians felt a responsibility to evangelize their conquerors.
- Eventually many of these tribes joined the Christian faith. And out of the rubble of the Roman Empire arose a new civilization that reflected a mixture of Greco-Roman culture, Christianity, and Germanic traditions. This European culture took a thousand years to form and these years became known as the Middle Ages.