

**OUTLINE AND EVALUATE THE CONTRIBUTION AND IMPACT OF  
AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO FOR THE CHURCH**

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**Module: 1005**

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**Date: 14/11/04**

## 1 Introduction

Augustine was arguably the most important theologian of all time, and certainly the key figure in the Patristic era. His work has had a resonance for all Christian eras, but was of particular relevance to the Reformation, given his focus on salvation by grace. We outline his work by theme and provide minimal biographical information, to cover the subject broadly while avoiding excessive length. The main sources are McGrath (1998) and LBC (1999).

## 2 Grace and Salvation

Augustine's views on grace were sharpened in the context of the controversy with the Pelagians. Pelagius maintained that mankind, being created by a good God, has free will which was not compromised by the fall. Hence, sin is entirely our own fault – God has made us capable of obeying his commands. Pelagius may have had in mind 1 Corinthians 10:13 “God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear.” But the corollary of his argument is to exclude God's grace from salvation – grace is at most the working of natural human faculties under God's moral guidance. We are saved by our own good works, imitating Christ.

Augustine refuted these arguments by putting forth a view that focuses on the fall and our incapacity to save ourselves. The first step is to argue that although humanity was created perfect, we have fallen wills with a bias to sin, which we cannot control. Sin is like a hereditary disease, passed down from Adam, as Romans 5:12 “just as sin entered the world through one man.... in this way death came to all men”. We need Christ to heal us, see Isaiah 53:5 “by his wounds we are healed”. Sin is also a power that holds us captive, from which Christ sets us free. Sin finally leads to condemnation by law from which Christ sets us free for forgiveness and pardon (Romans 8:2). The second step is that as a consequence of this inherent weakness, man is totally dependent on God for salvation as in John 15:5 “apart from me you can do nothing”. Grace is then the product of God's generous and quite unmerited attention to humanity resulting from his love for us, leading us to salvation, which we do not and cannot merit. A powerful support for this is Ephesians 2:8-9 “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-not by works, so that no one can boast.” A corollary is that since salvation is an act of God and he is omniscient, only the elect or predestined are saved.

Augustine's thought in this area impacted notably on the Reformation, when Luther and Calvin in effect rediscovered salvation by faith and God's grace, going against the bias towards works that arose from the system of indulgences and penances in the medieval church. Equally, it underpinned belief in predestination that is prominent in most Protestant churches. It should be noted, however, that Pelagian views often resurfaced, for example in the Arminian movement of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. A further effect was to enshrine the practice of infant baptism, given the implication that those that died unbaptised were damned, which led in turn to the universal church covering the entire population. A broader issue is the underlying pessimism about human nature, which was a point of contention with secular philosophy from the Enlightenment, but has arguably served the church all too well in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, when man's depravity was repeatedly illustrated.

## 3 Augustine and the Church

Another dissident group, the Donatists, argued that anyone who at any time had renounced faith (“traditio”) in the face of persecution should not be in the church. See Hebrews 10:26 on perseverance “If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the

truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment". Accordingly, they felt that it was justified to secede from the church if it allowed such people to become clergy, since it would nullify the administration of sacraments.

Augustine maintained that the church was a mixture of saints and sinners, not everyone being a genuine Christian. Key background is the parable of the weeds, from Matthew 13, whereby when 'God the farmer' discovered weeds growing with the wheat, he said "Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn." The implication is that church is not ready to separate from the world, which will occur at God's command at the end of the world. No fallen human being can separate the good (the so-called "invisible church" of the predestined elect – the "City of God") and the evil. Indeed, the role of the church is to be in the world and to civilise it. Furthermore, holiness in the church does not come from its members but from Christ, as in the robes of the fallen made "white in the blood of the Lamb" (Revelation 7:14). Following this, the efficacy of the sacraments is not dependent on the worthiness of the minister but the merits of Christ who instituted them.

Augustine's views are the basis of the universal church that incorporates all of humanity, as in the concept of "Christendom" in the Middle Ages. It is distinct from the more select "congregation of the saints" of the Reformation, which often included only committed believers. Catholics and most Protestants agree with his formulation regarding sacraments, namely that their efficacy depends on Christ and not the minister (although some Protestant denominations claim the worthiness of the minister also plays a role).

In respect of schism by the Donatists, Cyprian had argued that "you cannot have God as father without the church as mother". His analogy of the church was the single robe that Christ wore at his crucifixion, which the soldiers cast lots for rather than tearing it. Following Cyprian, Augustine argued that schism in the church as demanded by the Donatists was a much more serious sin than "traditio" and was deadly for salvation. This has been the basis for persecution and indeed religious wars as a consequence of secession from the Catholic church, notably at the time of the Reformation, as well as coercion of individuals to be members of the church.

#### **4 Interpretation of the Bible**

Concerning Bible interpretation, Augustine developed the work of Ambrose of Milan to argue for a twofold view of Scripture. First there was the "literal fleshly historical" approach and second the "allegorical mystical spiritual" sense. Some passages might have both meanings. His argument is that besides the historical meaning of an Old Testament text, it has a spiritual interpretation with reference to Christ and his church, what he calls "foreshadowing of things to come". In this context, for example, Adam represents Christ and the city of Jerusalem represents heaven. As Augustine states "the New Testament is hidden in the Old, the Old is made accessible by the New".

His thinking led the church to accept that the Old and New Testaments are unified and witness to the same faith, albeit in different ways of expression. This was not a guaranteed outcome, as writers such as Marcion had stressed the inferiority of the Old Testament, seeing creation as the work of an inferior God to the God of redemption in the New Testament, and hence that the text of the Old Testament should be largely discarded. The impact of Augustine's approach was also to bolster Medieval Scholasticism, as well as laying the foundations for our current interpretation of the Old Testament as Christians (for example the "suffering servant" in Isaiah being Christ).

## 5 The Trinity

Augustine contributed strongly to the Western view of the Trinity, notably that the Holy Spirit is said to proceed from the Son as well as the Father (“filioque”). Augustine argues his view on the basis of passages such as John 20:22 when Jesus breathes on his disciples saying “receive the Holy Spirit”. Augustine understood the Spirit as “the bond of love” between the Father and Son, while also emphasising that the Spirit proceeds mainly from the Father. The Trinity is characterised by divine interaction. This is distinct from the Eastern view that the Spirit proceeds solely from the Father, like the breath that is exhaled (by the Father) at the same time as the Word (the Son) is spoken. This debate was one of the grounds for the eventual schism of the Western and Eastern churches in 1054.

## 6 Christianity and Greek Philosophy

Ideas of Greek philosophy were pervasive in the patristic era, and the early church had to come to terms with them. Was philosophy simply inconsistent with Scripture and to be discarded (Tertullian), or was the whole of philosophy a foreshadowing of Christianity on the same level as the Old Testament was for the Jews (Clement of Alexandria)? Augustine took a middle way, suggesting that not all of philosophy was good, given its pagan roots, but some was worthwhile and should hence be a part of the Christian heritage as “well suited to be used by truth and excellent moral values”. His analogy was the gold and silver items that the Israelites took from Egypt in the Exodus, intending to put them to better use. These items were part of God’s providence. Meanwhile, Augustine highlights that Moses was commended for being “educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians” (Acts 7:22) suggesting by analogy Greek learning should be similarly prized. We may add that the above-mentioned view of the Trinity links to Augustine’s Greek-inspired concept of human thought as being constituted of mind (Father), wisdom (Son) and love (Spirit) – an interpretation which has only a tentative biblical basis.

The link of Greek philosophy to the church again had its greatest flowering in the Medieval period of Scholasticism. While many sound insights were indeed obtained from Greek philosophy, some more adverse tendencies can also be discerned. Notably, there is the divide between spirit and body in Greek thought, which is alien to Jews and hence to Scripture. For example, in his autobiographical “Confessions” Augustine saw his struggle against sin as a journey out of materiality into spirituality, couched in Platonic concepts (Noll 1997). Augustine’s Greek-inspired views led inter alia to a tendency in the church to asceticism that was not laid down as normative in the Bible (did Jesus not enjoy eating and drinking?), and also sinfulness of sex and repression of women (seen as only useful to bear children). These inter alia contributed to the rise of monasticism and – later - delayed ordination of women.

## 7 The concept of the “just war”

When Constantine made Christianity the state religion, the need for a doctrine of war, previously absent, became pressing. The “just war” theory begins with a strong presumption against use of force, and clarification of when it could be justified. As Augustine wrote to General Boniface “Peace should be your aim; war should be a matter of necessity so that God might free you from necessity and preserve you in peace. One does not pursue peace in order to wage war; he wages war to achieve peace.”

The key components of the just war are as follows: a just war requires a just cause, a just intention, limited means, a last resort, reasonable expectations of success, a formal declaration

by a legitimate authority and protection for non combatants (Atkinson 1995). These points have been the touchstone of whether a war is justified, and have arguably become more and more significant, giving weight to the views of the church even as Christianity has ebbed as a political force. A recent example is the controversy over the war in Iraq, see for example Hunsinger (2003) from the Presbyterians and Tauran (2002) from a Catholic standpoint.

## **Conclusion**

We have shown that Augustine's work covers a vast range and has had an impact on both theory and practice of the work of the church. We have only covered a selection of the areas he influenced – we could also have discussed his views that miracles had largely ceased with the end of the apostolic age (1 Corinthians 13:8) - which I contend stifled the gifts of the Holy Spirit through most of church history - and also that the second coming should be seen largely allegorically. He also contributed strongly to the beginning of the monastic era by founding the Augustinian order and to the doctrine of the Virgin Mary.

In my view, we can thank him for the emphasis on grace and faith as the bases for salvation that is the foundation of Evangelical belief (and to which the Catholic church “returned” in Vatican 2). Our understanding of the church as including those who are saints and sinners has had resonance through the ages. He also provided a powerful stimulus for Bible study and a key test for the justification of war. On the less positive side I would highlight that he has been to some extent the father of the over-use of Greek philosophy in theology, which has given rise to undue asceticism and contributed to the menial role of women in the church for much of its history – and even distorted the message of Scripture. Also his views on the need to persecute schismatics have contributed to some of the darker episodes of church history.

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