

Biography of St. Augustine

Saint Augustine was the Bishop of Hippo, a little town in North Africa and lived from 354-430. He had a Christian mother named Monica and a pagan father. A Christian later in life, Augustine was originally a Manichaean who were even more extreme than the Gnostics in condemning matter as evil. These heretics were an offshoot of the old Persian Zoroastrian in the guise of Christians and accepting Paul & Jesus. They held to an absolute dualism, a god of light and an evil god of darkness. The Manichaeans are thought to have been founded by Mani (?216-276). Man had a possibility to become of the kingdom of light, if he did, he would transcend his body. They condemned marriage and procreation as evil but fornication was OK, leading to orgies.

Monica worried greatly over her son and wanted his baptism deferred. Augustine overheard a child in the distance say as if to him "take heed" upon which he turned to the 13th chapter of Romans which said, "Put on the Lord, Jesus Christ". In Milan Augustine met Ambrose, who was instrumental in his final conversion to Christianity. He was baptized by Ambrose in 387 with his friend Alypius and his son Adeodatus.

Augustine was a great writer and thinker and his writings became the standard. It is not possible to exaggerate his influence in European thought. He wrote his confessions, describing fully his life and temptations for a people curious to know the lives of others, but careless to know their own. With the utmost candor Augustine divulges the sins and folly of his youth and the weaknesses that still beset him.

Augustine wrote the City of God, which was written to rebut the pagan argument that Christianity was responsible for the decline of the Roman Empire by rejecting the Roman Gods. Christianity brought men into the City of God (civitas terrena), something far better than the petty things of this world. The heavenly city; this entire church, militant and triumphant, is the temple of God; not applied to this pilgrim church in exile on earth. Two cities; one of men who live according to the flesh, the other according to the spirit, each after his kind. He clearly saw and presented human history as having a purposive development in time, as having a spiritual significance as struggle. The church is in history, but it is also above and outside of history. It changes since it grows, a goal a purpose as well as a way. The City of God leads the mind very directly towards the possibility into making the world into a theological and organized kingdom of heaven. "A spiritual society of the predestined faithful". The church was to be the ruler of the world over all nations. The history of the western world from the 5th to the 15th centuries is the history of the failure of the great idea of divine world government to realize the peace of Christ throughout the earth.

Augustine's thinking proved seminal because he raised more questions than answers, it was up to later theologians to come up with the answers. He condemned the practice of deferring baptism. Plato taught him God, but Jesus showed him the way. Augustine felt that preaching was his most important duty and he continued until the end. "I do not wish to be saved without you. Why am I in the world? Not only to live in Jesus Christ; but to live in Him with you. This is my passion, my honor, by glory, my joy, and my riches."

Saint Augustine gathered up the strands from Christian traditions and classical antiquity alike and wove them into a new fabric destined to influence profoundly the thought of the church. By describing his own tortuous course he analyzed all mankind. He was himself an illustration of man's corruption, redemption, and continuing imperfection. Augustine developed also Paul's teaching on predestination, but like the errors of John Calvin, with

sharper rigidity. Ideally he believed there should be no sexual relations except for procreation and felt that the excitation of passion dissipates rational control. No other Christian after Paul was to have such an extent in the church. Augustine was a Bishop for 40 years, a true intellectual, trained in the classical arts, a philosopher, orator, writer, dramatist, man of letters, thinker of great power, daring pioneer in speculation, theological genius with the communicative sympathy of an artist.

"Even from the womb of my mother, sealed with the mark of His cross and salted with His salt.. my cleansing was deferred.. because the defilements of sin would bring more guilt. Let him alone, do as he will, not baptized. Some there be that seduce through philosophy. Scriptures; I see a thing not understood by the proud, nor laid open to children, lowly in access, in its recesses lofty, and veiled with mysteries. To Milan I came, to Ambrose the bishop. I was slain spiritually.. Thou hadst by a vision assured her thereof. Ambrose - only his celibacy seemed to me a painful course. I joyed also that the old scriptures of the law and the prophets were laid before me.. with joy I heard Ambrose in his sermons."

It has been said that Augustine baptized Plato. His distinction of the ordained priesthood and laity has been basic in Catholics. Augustine taught the primacy of the will of the heart, of the forces of motion. Platonic conception of God as the principal of absolute being underlies Augustine's Christianity. In later life Augustine emphasized infant baptism. Had a taste for miracles. He sounded the death knoll for ancient philosophy. Augustine stands at the beginning and end of medieval philosophy, the end because the Reformation reformers rediscovered him. Augustine set the mold of western Christianity for the next seven hundred years.

True to the idea of progressive revelation through history, Augustine retracted many of his doctrines at the end of his life. Who know how many other thoughts he may have amended if he had lived longer. With all the great things Augustine taught, who knows how many modern theologians he would now condemn for taking his mistakes so literally. With his death, the mediaeval history of Christianity may be said to have begun. Augustine Gave the policy of persecution his personal approval, supplied theological justification, concern heresy and schism rather than paganism. We ought to be careful about those converted through the sword, those who accepted Christianity for political or social advantage. Scarcely ever is Jesus thought for His own sake. On tongues: that thing was done for a betokening and then taken away. Augustine's position of the relation of faith and reason influences all the rest of his thinking. reason: the gaze of the mind, faith: assent to something not clearly seen. Unless you believed you will not understand. In war even, if you must needs still be engaged in it, hold to the faith, seek after peace.