

Augustine of Hippo: The Relevance of His Life and Thought Today

Nick Needham

Nick Needham is Pastor of the Reformed Baptist Church of Inverness, Scotland. He also serves as Lecturer of Church History at Highland Theological College in Dingwall, Scotland. Before this, he taught Systematic Theology at the Scottish Baptist College in Glasgow. Dr. Needham wrote his Ph.D. thesis on the nineteenth-century Scottish theologian Thomas Erskine of Linlathen.

Introduction

Traditionally, four of the Latin fathers of the church have been given the illustrious title “Doctor” (teacher)—Ambrose of Milan, Jerome, Augustine of Hippo, and Gregory the Great. All four deserve our affectionate acquaintance; but the greatest of them must surely be Augustine, both for the sheer depth and richness of his thought, and for his unparalleled influence on subsequent generations. A. N. Whitehead once quipped that the history of Western philosophy was simply a series of footnotes to Plato. By a pardonable exaggeration, one might say that the history of Western theology is simply a series of footnotes to Augustine. The fifth century African father towers mightily over the succeeding centuries like some spiritual version of Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar:

Why, man, he doth bestride the narrow world
Like a Colossus, and we petty men
Walk under his huge legs, and peep about.

We are sometimes fond of saying that we stand on the shoulders of the great Christians who went before us. In the case of Augustine, I suspect most of us may feel less a dwarf on his shoulders than an ant on his ankle. In the words of the “Old Catholic” scholar Johann Nepomuk Huber,

Augustine is a unique phenomenon in Christian history. No one of the other fathers has left so luminous

traces of his existence. Though we find among them many rich and powerful minds, yet we find in none the forces of personal character, mind, heart, and will, so largely developed and so harmoniously working. No one surpasses him in wealth of perceptions and dialectical sharpness of thoughts, in depth and fervor of religious sensibility, in greatness of aims and energy of action. He therefore also marks the culmination of the patristic age, and has been elevated by the acknowledgment of succeeding times as the first and the universal church father.¹

Huber does not overstate. For we are dealing in Augustine with one of the truly seminal minds of human history, and it is no self-depreciation on our part to entertain a due sense of modesty and humility. Few scientists will ever be Einstein; few theologians will ever be Augustine. In the post-apostolic church, he has been to Christian piety what David is in the Psalms, and to Christian theology what Paul is in his letters. The writings of Augustine have proved a perpetual stream of outstandingly fruitful influence on Christian spirituality and doctrine down through the ages. Many of the noblest movements of church renewal have taken their inspiration from the bishop of Hippo, notably the Lollards, the Hussites, the Protestant Reformation itself, the Puritans, and the Jansenists. Many of the most brilliant thinkers, preachers, and saints of Western church history have been devout disciples of Augustine; one has but to name the

Venerable Bede, Anselm of Canterbury, Bernard of Clairvaux, Thomas Aquinas, John Wyclif, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Blaise Pascal, and B. B. Warfield. It seems, then, that if Western Christians are to understand their own heritage, they cannot escape engaging with the titanic figure of Augustine.

There are other reasons for acquainting ourselves with the bishop of Hippo. Let me suggest three. First of all, there is no personality of the ancient world, Christian or Pagan, so intimately known to us as Augustine. His *Confessions* more or less invented autobiography, and give us the most entrancing and self-revealing portrait of a soul in all literature. The father of the Renaissance, Francesco Petrarch, after his mid-life conversion to Christ, carried with him a copy of Augustine's *Confessions* wherever he went. Countless hosts have echoed Petrarch's verdict. Can we neglect this unique literary monument of a soul's journey, without succumbing to the charge of being spiritual and cultural ignoramus?

Second, Augustine wrestles endlessly with the most fundamental questions of existence. What can the human mind truly know? What is God? What is truth? What is beauty? What is time? What is history? What is the soul? What is memory? What is faith? What is reason? What is the relationship between faith and reason? What is justice? What is human destiny? What are the proper limits of political action? Where does evil come from? How can we reconcile evil and suffering with a belief in a good and almighty God? Augustine sets the example par excellence of a Christian thinker determined to view the whole of life in the light of his faith, rather than give a little private corner of it to Christ, leaving the rest to be

squeezed into the mold of contemporary non-Christian culture.

Third, there is Augustine's decisive role in the historical development of Christian doctrine. The church's theology has always been hammered out on the anvil of heresy. Where would our understanding of the Trinity and the incarnation be, without the purgative storms of the Arian controversy? Men like Athanasius and the Cappadocian fathers forged a newly refined, more lucid and articulate conception of the Godhead and of deity incarnate, in the context of the convulsive dispute with Arius and his ilk. This refined theology was summed up in the great Nicene Creed. Augustine's friend, the celebrated Jerome, admitted that many of the utterances of the orthodox fathers prior to Arius did not quite come up to the standard of this more coherent Nicene doctrine, wrought out in the furnace of the fourth century debate: "It must be admitted that before Arius arose in Alexandria as a demon of the south, things were said incautiously which cannot be defended against a malign criticism."²

Augustine likewise was the principal theologian who wrought out a more articulate and coherent doctrine of human nature, its fall and restoration, in the fifth century setting of the Pelagian controversy. If we owe our developed Trinitarian theology and Christology to Athanasius and the Cappadocians, we owe our developed anthropology and soteriology, our understanding of the Bible's teaching on the relations between human sin and divine grace, to Augustine. He carried the Latin West with him on these matters (although not the Greek East), embedding in the Western Christian consciousness a high, awesome, man-humbling, God-exalting vision of original sin, predestina-

tion, and efficacious grace in regeneration, which has renewed itself in every epoch and endured to the present. If we would grapple with these tremendous issues, where better to go than the first and greatest “doctor of grace,” the bishop of Hippo?

Biographical Sketch

Let us now offer a sketch of Augustine’s life, and then look in more detail at some of these weighty themes. Briefly, Aurelius Augustine was born in Thagaste in Roman North Africa in 354, to a Pagan father, Patricius, and a Christian mother, Monnica. His mother, a spiritually minded lady, did her best to instill the Christian faith into her son, but the growing Augustine met moral shipwreck on the shoals of his burgeoning sexuality. Abandoning the Christianity of his youth, he began living with a girl whom he never married, by whom he had an illegitimate son, Adeodatus.

To add to his mother’s anguish, Augustine also joined the cult-like Gnostic sect of the Manichees. In desperation over her wayward child, Monnica turned to a Catholic bishop who was himself a converted Manichee, and pled with him to reason with Augustine. (By “Catholic” in the early church period, we mean simply the mainstream orthodox church, distinguished from dissident groups like Montanists and Arians.) The bishop refused. “Only prayer, not arguments, will bring your son to Christ,” he insisted. When a weeping Monnica persisted in beseeching his help, the bishop famously said, “Go. It cannot be that the son of such tears will perish.”

The words were prophetic. Now a teacher of rhetoric in Italy, Augustine began to lose his faith in Manichaeism. Its

pretensions to a perfectly rational worldview seemed hollow when compared to the higher and deeper philosophy of Plotinus, father of Neoplatonism—a reinvention of Plato that transformed his teaching into a mystical religious faith in a Supreme Being, “the One.” Plotinus introduced Augustine to a truer conception of God as the absolute spiritual entity, exalted far above space, time, and matter, whose image was reflected in the human soul.

Intellectually liberating though this was, Neoplatonism did not challenge Augustine’s moral lifestyle. This came through the preaching of Ambrose, bishop of Milan, whose pulpit eloquence captivated Augustine. Here was an orthodox Christian preacher who both made the faith of the church seem credible, and lived it out in his own life of steely, shining integrity, before which even emperors trembled (Milan was at that time the Western imperial capital).

Ambrose’s preaching soon induced a spiritual crisis in Augustine. Let us hear him tell it in his own words. He is in a garden in Milan, overwhelmed by a consciousness of his sin, especially his bondage to sexual desire:

I flung myself down, I do not know how, under a fig-tree, giving free course to my tears. The streams of my eyes gushed forth, an acceptable sacrifice to You. And, not in these very words, yet to this effect, I spoke much to You: “But You, O Lord, how long? How long, Lord? Will You be angry for ever? Oh, do not remember against us our former iniquities!” For I felt that I was enslaved by them. I sent up these sorrowful cries: “How long, how long? Tomorrow, tomorrow? Why not now? Why is there not this hour an end to my uncleanness?”

I was saying these things and weeping in the most bitter contrition of my heart, when I heard the

voice of a boy or girl, I do not know which, coming from a neighbouring house, chanting and repeating the words, "Take up and read, take up and read!" Immediately my attitude changed, and I began most earnestly to consider whether it was usual for children in any kind of game to sing words like this. I could not remember ever hearing it before. So, restraining the torrent of my tears, I rose up, interpreting it as a command to me from Heaven to open the Scripture, and to read the first chapter my gaze fell on. For I had heard of Antony [the great desert father of Egypt], that accidentally coming in to church while the gospel was being read, he received the exhortation as if the reading were addressed to him: "Go and sell what you have, and give it to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me." And by this oracle he was immediately converted to You.

So I quickly returned to the place where Alypius [Augustine's friend and companion in the search for truth] was sitting; for that is where I had put down the volume of the apostles, when I had risen from that spot. I grasped it, opened it, and in silence read that paragraph on which my eyes first fell: "Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in lust and debauchery, not in strife and envy; but put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfil its lusts." I would read no further, nor did I need to. For instantly, as the sentence ended, a light of assurance was infused into my heart, and all the gloom of doubt vanished away.³

That was in 386. The following year, Augustine was baptised by Ambrose, along with his 15 year-old son Adeodatus, who had also been converted. (Adeodatus died young, three years later.) Returning to Thagaste, Augustine founded a pioneer monastic community. In 391, however, he was on a visit to Hippo Regius, the second greatest city of Roman North Africa (after Carthage), when providence unexpectedly

changed the whole course of his life. He was worshipping in the Catholic church in Hippo one Sunday, when the elderly preacher, bishop Valerius, recognized him. Was this not Augustine, the recent convert from Thagaste, whose writings had already begun to make an impact on the Christians of the day? Valerius was a Greek, and could not speak Latin very well; he had prayed for a long time that God would send him an assistant pastor. He began preaching on this very topic; the congregation caught his meaning, surrounded Augustine, and cried out that here was the very man for the job!

Augustine was horrified, but could do nothing against the unanimous and enthusiastic acclamations of the people. Like the child's voice in Milan, "Take up and read," it seemed that through the voice of the Christian people of Hippo, God was once again intervening directly in Augustine's life. He submitted, and was ordained assistant bishop to Valerius. When Valerius died five year later, Augustine became sole bishop of Hippo's Catholic church, a position he filled until his own death in 430.

Augustine soon exercised an intellectual and spiritual pre-eminence over the whole African Catholic Church, by virtue of his preaching (he is commonly regarded as one of the great preachers of the Christian centuries), his endless stream of superior writings, his role in the key controversies of the day, and his personal influence on the other Catholic bishops of Africa. By the end of Augustine's life, his distinguished French disciple, Prosper of Aquitaine, could say this of his master without any sense of exaggeration,

Augustine, at the time the first and foremost among the bishops of the

Lord.... Among many other divine gifts showered on him by the Spirit of Truth, he excelled particularly in the gifts of knowledge and wisdom flowing from his love of God, which enabled him to slay with the invincible sword of the Word not only the Pelagian heresy, but also many other previous heresies. This doctor, resplendent with the glory of so many honours and crowns which he gained for the exaltation of the Church and the glory of Christ.... Augustine, the greatest man in the Church today.⁴

The Relevance of Augustine for Today

How relevant, then, is Augustine for us in the twenty-first century? Let me suggest three areas in which, though dead, he yet speaks.

Spirituality

First, the African father ranks as one of the classic spiritual writers of all time. Devotional literature holds few works comparable to Augustine's *Confessions*, while his *Soliloquies* have also awakened and inspired many. We would have to place these writings in the same select league as Bernard of Clairvaux's *On Loving God*, Thomas à Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ*, John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, and Henry Scougal's *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*.

Testimonies to Augustine's outstanding worth in this regard flood in from all quarters, even the unlikeliest. Consider, for example, the Eastern Orthodox Church, which has never given a commanding place to Augustine as a theologian, partly because Orthodoxy rejects the Augustinian view of human bondage to sin and the sovereign efficacy of divine grace in salvation. Despite this, Augustine's *Confessions* have been warmly embraced as a classic of Christian

spirituality by the Orthodox. Archbishop Philaret of Chernigov, for example, says this of Augustine:

The highest quality in him is the profound, sincere piety with which all his works are filled... [especially the *Confessions*] which without doubt can strike anyone to the depths of his soul by the sincerity of their contrition, and warm one by the warmth of the piety which is so essential on the path of salvation.⁵

Closer to home, the great nineteenth century evangelical church historian Philip Schaff says this:

The *Confessions* are the most profitable, at least the most edifying, product of his pen; indeed, we may say, the most edifying book in all the patristic literature. They were accordingly the most read even during his lifetime, and they have been the most frequently published since. A more sincere and more earnest book was never written... Certainly no autobiography is superior to it in true humility, spiritual depth, and universal interest. Augustine records his own experience, as a heathen sensualist, a Manichean heretic, an anxious inquirer, a sincere penitent, and a grateful convert. He finds a response in every human soul that struggles through the temptations of nature and the labyrinth of error to the knowledge of truth and the beauty of holiness, and after many sighs and tears finds rest and peace in the arms of a merciful Saviour.⁶

None of the writings of the early church fathers have so quenched people's spiritual thirst down through the centuries as have the writings of the bishop of Hippo. They offer a perennially needful corrective to two equal and opposite errors faced by Christians in every age: either to gravitate to a cold theological orthodoxy devoid of heart, or to a sentimental spirituality that sits light to

doctrine. Augustine is the antidote to both false tendencies. In him we discover heart and mind married in an intimate union where deep, thoughtful theology, rooted in Scripture and never afraid of condemning error, nonetheless burns and sings with a spiritual vibrancy that makes most modern piety seem pale and sickly by contrast. If we do nothing else over this coming year in our Christian reading, we could scarcely do better than read Augustine's *Confessions*, either for the first time, or to rekindle our acquaintance with this universally recognized devotional classic. Here is a taster:

What is it that I love in loving You? Not physical beauty, nor the splendour of time, nor the radiance of the light, so pleasant to our eyes, nor the sweet melodies of songs of all kinds, nor the flagrant smell of flowers, and ointments, and spices, nor manna and honey, nor limbs pleasant to the embraces of the flesh. I do not love these things when I love my God. And yet I love a certain kind of light, sound, fragrance, food, and embrace in loving my God; for He is the light, sound, fragrance, food, and embrace of my inner man. There, a light shines upon my soul which no place can contain, and a sound is heard which time cannot snatch away. There breathes a fragrance which no breeze can disperse, a food which no eating can diminish, and an embrace which no fullness of satisfaction can dissolve. This is what I love, when I love my God. And what is He? I asked the earth; and it answered, "I am not He." And everything on earth made the same confession. I asked the sea and the deeps, and the creeping things that lived, and they replied, "We are not your God. Seek higher than we." I asked the breezy air; and the universal atmosphere with its inhabitants answered, "I am not God." I asked the heavens, the sun, moon, and stars: "Neither," they said, "are we the God whom you seek." And I answered all these things which crowd about the door of my flesh, "You have told me con-

cerning my God that you are *not* He. Tell me something positive about Him!" And with a loud voice they exclaimed: "*He made us.*"⁷

The Meaning of History

Next, there is the longest and profoundest theological work Augustine ever wrote, his *City of God*. Its overarching message remains as pertinent today as when Augustine first penned it. Schaff again says,

The *City of God* is the masterpiece of the greatest genius among the Latin Fathers, and the best known and most read of his works, except the *Confessions*. It embodies the result of thirteen years of intellectual labour and study (from AD 413-426). It is a vindication of Christianity against the attacks of the heathen in view of the sacking of the city of Rome by the barbarians, at a time when the old Greco-Roman civilization was approaching its downfall, and a new Christian civilization was beginning to rise on its ruins. It is the first attempt at a philosophy of history, under the aspect of two rival cities or communities—the eternal city of God and the perishing city of the world.⁸

Essentially, the treatise is a meditation on the meaning of history, which Augustine interpreted as a conflict between two communities, which he called "the city of God" and "the city of the world." Ever since the fall of Adam, Augustine argued, the human race had been divided into two spiritual societies: the unregenerate whose head was Satan, and the regenerate whose head was Christ. Human history was the unfolding of the story of how these two "cities" interacted. The city of God, while not *identical* with the visible church (she harbored tares alongside wheat), was nonetheless *nurtured* in her bosom by the Word of God and the sacraments; while the city of the world

found its most concrete manifestation in the state, especially powerful states—the empires of man.

Arguably, the most important thing Augustine does for us today in *City of God* is to offer a piercing Christian critique of the pretensions of the city of man. The reality of original sin and human depravity, Augustine insisted, are as applicable to human institutions as to human individuals. He had no time for Messianic posturings by any state, whether the Christianized Roman Empire of his own day, or any successor in the future. Whatever their rhetoric, Augustine had little doubt that earthly kingdoms were ultimately based on the *realpolitik* of power. The only kind of unity they understood was the unity of force: join with us in happy brotherhood, or else we shall kill you!

Indeed, the bishop of Hippo pronounced pessimistically as he surveyed history, all the kingdoms of this world were, at the end of the day, little better than vast, organized conspiracies of robbers. What were the most illustrious earthly rulers? What was Alexander the Great, that idol of Greek civilization? What Alexander did on a grand scale by his supposedly glorious wars and conquests, Augustine felt, was no different in principle from what a pirate does in a single ship. When earthly cities and kingdoms fell, therefore, as they all eventually did, their punishment was just. For “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God”—all men and all kingdoms.

This was a radical assertion in Augustine’s context, because many Christians regarded the Christianized Roman Empire of his day as tantamount to God’s kingdom on earth. They found it all but impossible to distinguish between the

interests of Rome and the interests of God, and all but inconceivable to contemplate the Empire’s fall (despite the fall of its ancient capital city of Rome to Alaric the Visigoth in 410—the Empire’s functional capital by then was in fact Constantinople).

Augustine dissented from this idealization of the Roman Empire; no matter how Christian it might profess itself, it was just as fallible and mutable, as caught up in the flux of history and human sin, as any other kingdom. There was nothing sacrosanct about it. Its fall was perfectly conceivable. And when or if the Empire crumbled, the Christian would discern therein the righteous providence of God, which ever humbles the pretentious and self-exalting cities of men. History knew only one enduring city, Augustine affirmed—the city of God. And she was not a political entity, but a spiritual entity, dwelling not in the swords of proud armies but in the hearts of lowly believers, outlasting the vanity of all earthly kingdoms.

As a corollary to this critical level-headedness about human states, Augustine also rebuffed any romantic idea that Christianity would ever bring about global peace and prosperity. The gospel was not the means to a socio-political paradise. This was not because Augustine doubted the relevance of the Bible to secular affairs: the Bible was a fountain of wisdom for the whole of human life. Unfortunately, original sin meant that the human mind, even in Christians, was a fountain of never-ending folly and sinful perversion. Therefore, Augustine advised, we must have an ice-cold realism in our expectations of what fallen and foolish human beings could achieve in the world. Even the best and wisest Christians were

still corrupted by sin, and capable of much that was evil and destructive. The quest for an earthly utopia was, in Augustine's view, the pursuit of a mirage, doomed to failure. Heaven was in heaven, and never on earth.

Yet Augustine did not recommend political withdrawal and quietism on the part of Christians, as we might possibly have anticipated. On the contrary, he declared, the values pursued by the city of man—peace and prosperity—were good in themselves, as far as they went. Christians could cooperate in the endeavor to establish those values, even though a faithful follower of Christ would not be driven by political utopianism in the venture. Augustine therefore repudiated the notion that Christianity was incompatible with good citizenship. The citizens of the heavenly city could and should collaborate with the citizens of the earthly city in seeking its earthly good. The values of the earthly city became false and evil, however, when made into the *ultimate* goal of human life, and pursued at the expense of *justice*.

Does human political life not always need this Augustinian warning? We would surely do well to hear Augustine's insistence that any exaltation of the earthly city and its values to absolute status is false and destructive. Man's ultimate destiny lies beyond the earthly city, beyond this perishing life, in the transcendent God who created him; and this supernatural destiny will be fulfilled only when the Son of God, Jesus Christ, returns at the close of history and creates new heaven, new earth.

Augustine's position here was well summed up by the nineteenth century Danish Lutheran thinker, Søren Kierkegaard: "Relate yourself relatively to the

relative, absolutely to the absolute." The soul-destroying error of utopian dreamers and imperialists is that they relate themselves *absolutely* to the *relative*: they make an ultimate goal out of man's earthly life and secular well-being. In so doing, they reveal that they love the creature more than the Creator. But true Christians, Augustine emphasized, would never confuse the relative good of the fading and fleeting city of this world, with the absolute good of the eternal city of God. Indeed, it was precisely by turning their backs on the city of God that unbelievers had made such a bloody and ruinous idol of the earthly city:

They neglect the higher goods of the heavenly city, which are secure through eternal victory and never-ending peace, and thus they inordinately covet the good things of the present life, believing them to be the only desirable things, or loving them better than those things which faith reckons to be better. The inevitable consequence is fresh misery and an increase of the wretchedness that was already there.⁹

By striving for a secular heaven on earth, social engineers and empire-builders were more likely to turn earth into hell. For Augustine, Christian faith alone enabled people to pursue earthly goals with a humble sense of realism, and without the damning sins of idolatry (our country or political party is an absolute value) or injustice (those who oppose us have no value). If biblically informed, prudent, humble Christians of Augustine's stamp were to act as a leaven within the politics of their country and their day, we might hopefully expect—not indeed the building of Jerusalem in England's (or America's) green and pleasant land, but at least the sabotaging of the building of Babylon. Such Christians are the state's

unsung heroes, putting crucial checks on its tendencies to idolatry and injustice.

There is much more that could be said about *City of God*, but perhaps enough of an appetizer has been given to stimulate readers to drink from the fountainhead. In the words of Marcus Dodds, its nineteenth century translator,

[T]he interest attaching to the *City of God* is not merely historical. It is the earnestness and ability with which [Augustine] develops his own philosophical and theological views which gradually fascinate the reader, and make him see why the world has set this among the few greatest books of all time. The fundamental lines of the Augustinian theology are here laid down in a comprehensive and interesting form. Never was thought so abstract expressed in language so popular . . . And though there are in the *City of God*, as in all ancient books, things that seem to us childish and barren, there are also the most surprising anticipations of modern speculation. There is an earnest grappling with those problems which are continually re-opened because they underline man's relation to God and the spiritual world—the problems which are not peculiar to any one century.¹⁰

The Doctrine of Grace

Finally, Augustine's ongoing relevance to today's church may be discovered in the fabulous theological wealth of his anti-Pelagian treatises. If we are confessionally Lutheran or Reformed, we find in these writings the first clear, coherent articulation of the biblical anthropology and soteriology so dear to our own hearts: the total spiritual inability of unregenerate human nature to respond savingly to God, the unconditional divine election of those who are to be saved, the manifestation of this grace in the mission of Christ the Savior, the sovereign efficacy of the Holy Spirit in giving faith and repentance

to sinners, and the perseverance of the elect to the end of their earthly pilgrimage and entrance into heaven at last. In many ways, Augustine's discourses on grace are simply an extended meditation, profound and awe-inspiring, on the "golden chain" of Rom 8:29-30: foreknown, predestined, called, justified, glorified.

Prior to Augustine, we are hard pressed to find this developed theology of human nature and divine grace in the writings of the fathers. We discover scattered utterances, hints, premonitions, embryonic ideas: but no sustained or articulate exposition. There is a good reason for this. As Augustine himself pointed out, prior to Pelagius and his optimistic humanism masquerading as Christianity, the controversy over sin and grace had never before arisen in that precise form, as the specific, conscious, and systematic focus of theological reflection and disputation. Referring to previous church fathers, Augustine said,

What need is there to search into their works, who before this heresy arose were under no necessity of troubling themselves to solve this difficult question; which without doubt they would have done, had they been obliged to answer such things? Hence it is, that what they thought of the grace of God, they have briefly and cursorily touched on in some places of their writings, whereas they dwelt at length on those things in which they disputed against the enemies of the church, in exhortations to every virtue by which to serve the living and true God for the purpose of attaining eternal life and true happiness.¹¹

Augustine showed a critical awareness of the development of doctrine. As James Orr argues in *The Progress of Dogma*,

Every doctrine, I have urged, has its "hour"—the period when it emerges into individual prominence, and

becomes the subject of exhaustive discussion.¹²

The “hour” of the Trinity struck in the fourth century; the “hour” of justification by faith struck in the sixteenth century; and, Orr maintains, the “hour” of grace struck in the fifth century, with the Pelagian controversy. It is not surprising, therefore, that we do not (for example) observe the same kind of systematic clarity in the articulation of the doctrine of the Trinity in the ante-Nicene fathers that we *do* find in the aftermath of Arianism, with the linguistic and conceptual precision forged in the fires of controversy by Athanasius and the Cappadocian fathers.

The same reasoning, both Augustine and Orr maintain, must be applied to the doctrine of grace before and after Pelagianism. To quote Orr again, regarding the fifth century:

[T]hat the “hour” had come for them [the doctrines of sin and grace]—that they were “in the air”, waiting to be discussed—is seen in the simultaneous emergence of two men who represent the opposite poles of doctrine on this subject—Augustine and Pelagius. What Athanasius and Arius were in the Arian controversy; what Anselm and Abelard were in the Soteriological controversy; what Calvin and Arminius were in the post-Reformation controversy on the application of Redemption—that Augustine and Pelagius were in this Anthropological controversy.¹³

Augustine was the foremost figure of the early fifth century to explore as never before the teaching of Scripture, especially the apostle Paul, on the extent of sin and the sovereignty of grace. But Augustine was not alone, and we should not allow his towering stature to obscure the widespread support he received in the Latin West from fellow theologians.

In particular, we should bear in mind how the Catholics of North Africa were practically as one man in their “Augustinian” theology against Pelagius’s exaltation of human free will. A very conservative body of men, those North Africans; and they had no sense of adopting novelties when they took up the sword of God’s sovereign grace to split the skull of Pelagian pride. This lends credence to Orr’s judgment that predestination was “in the air” breathed by Catholic theology, at least in North Africa, and needed only the heat of the Pelagian controversy to condense into a distilled dew of explicit doctrine. In the century after Augustine’s death, a noble company of theologians arose to defend and enlarge his legacy, among them Prosper of Aquitaine, Fulgentius of Ruspe, Avitus of Vienne, and Caesarius of Arles. Prosper’s treatises were translated into English in the 1950s in the *Ancient Christian Writers* series, and make stirring and edifying reading.

Augustine’s anti-Pelagian writings are among the most accessible of his theological works. They are full of thoughtful exegesis; they burn with spiritual passion; they touch issues of salvation that resonate in every Christian heart; and they lay a solid biblical and theological foundation for “the doctrine of grace” (as Augustine as his co-workers called it—we today tend to make it plural, “doctrines”), which has been tried and found trustworthy in every succeeding age. Next after the apostles Paul and John, it is Augustine who has bequeathed to the church a truly God-centered vision of grace; and if we who hold this vision are to be named after any post-apostolic man, we are Augustinians rather than Calvinists. (Calvin once said he would be happy to confess his faith purely in the words of Augustine.) C. H.

Spurgeon puts it in historical perspective like this:

The man who preaches the doctrines of grace has an apostolic succession indeed. Can we not trace our pedigree through a whole line of men like Newton, and Whitefield, and Owen and Bunyan, straight away on till we come to Calvin, Luther, and Zwingli; and then we can go back from them to Savonarola, to Jerome of Prague, to Huss, and then back to Augustine, the mighty preacher of Christianity; and from St. Augustine to Paul is but one step. We need not be ashamed of our pedigree; although Calvinists are now considered to be heterodox, we are and ever must be orthodox. It is the old doctrine.¹⁴

Perhaps the only real difference between Augustine's exposition and that favored by mainstream Reformed theology today lies in his understanding of perseverance. Both Augustine and modern Reformed theology have a doctrine of "temporary faith"—those who profess faith for a time, perhaps very credibly, but then fall away and are lost. Reformed theology has tended to emphasize the discernible difference between temporary and saving faith; Augustine, by contrast, emphasized how similar they were. As a result, Augustine was notably less confident than Reformed theologians have generally been in offering assurance of final salvation to the professing believer. Most of the time, the bishop of Hippo preferred warning people against presumption: you may profess faith today, but the heart is deceitful, and rather than presume on your final salvation, you should continually cry to God for the salvation that endures.

Augustine's position here was complicated (needlessly, in the view of mainstream Reformed thinking) by his belief in infant baptismal regeneration. He had

to find a way of accounting for why so many regenerated infants failed to grow up into credibly godly believers. He found it by postulating that regenerating grace could be lost. In other words, what distinguished God's elect was not the possession of regenerating grace alone, but persevering grace.

The African father's problem here is, however, rendered all but immaterial if we discard his belief in infant baptism, and affirm that the spiritual blessings of the sacraments (baptism and the Lord's supper) always flow *through* the channel of saving faith. Consequently, rather than regenerate a person, whose regeneration must then be reckoned lost if he finally apostatizes, baptism instead imparts strengthening grace to those who are already regenerate believers. An unregenerate unbeliever who receives baptism merely gets wet (not to put too fine a point on it!). Arguably, then, the most robust and consistent Augustinianism is found among "Augustinian Baptists," whose understanding of perseverance is no longer burdened by Augustine's moot conviction about infant baptismal regeneration.

But let us not paint too critical a portrait of Augustine's doctrine of perseverance. When addressing himself in a pastoral context to believers troubled by lack of assurance, he could sound very much like a Reformed pastor of today:

You, therefore, ought to hope that perseverance in obedience should be given you by the Father of Lights, from whom come down every excellent gift and every perfect gift (James 1:17), and you should ask for it in your daily prayers. And in doing this, you ought to trust that you are not strangers to the predestination of His people, because it is He Himself who bestows even the power of so praying. Far be it from

you to despair of yourselves! For you are bidden to put your hope in Him, not in yourselves. Indeed, cursed is every one who has hope in man (Jeremiah 17:5); and it is good rather to trust in the Lord than to trust in man, because blessed are all they that put their trust in Him (Psalm 2:12). Holding this hope, serve the Lord in fear, and rejoice before Him with trembling (Psalm 2:11). No one can be certain of the life eternal which God who does not lie has promised to the children of promise before the times of eternity (Titus 1:2) — no one, unless that life of his, which is a state of trial upon the earth, is completed. But God will make us to persevere in Himself to the end of that life, since we daily say to Him, 'Lead us not into temptation.'

When these and similar things are said, whether to few Christians or to the multitude of the church, why do we fear to preach the predestination of the saints and the true grace of God — that is, the grace which is not given according to our merits — as the Holy Scripture declares it? Or must it be feared that a person should despair of his salvation, when his hope is shown to be placed in God? Should he not rather despair of his salvation, if in his excess of pride and unhappiness, he should place his hope in himself?¹⁵

The Christian, then, will find rich food for his soul in Augustine's treatises on grace. These are found gathered together in volume 5 of Schaff's *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series One*, with a valuable introduction by B. B. Warfield. Augustine deals with these matters in other places too, e.g., in *City of God* and the *Enchiridion* (a sort of mini-handbook of doctrine). Warfield passes the following noble verdict on Augustine's theology of grace:

Its central thought was the absolute dependence of the individual on the grace of God in Jesus Christ. It made everything that concerned salvation to be of God, and traced the source of all good to Him.

"Without me ye can do nothing," is the inscription on one side of it; on the other stands written, "All things are yours." Augustine held that he who builds on a human foundation builds on sand, and founded all his hope on the Rock itself. And there also he founded his teaching; as he distrusted man in the matter of salvation, so he distrusted him in the form of theology. No other of the fathers so conscientiously wrought out his theology from the revealed Word; no other of them so sternly excluded human additions. The subjects of which theology treats, he declares, are such as "we could by no means find out unless we believed them on the testimony of Holy Scripture." "Where Scripture gives no certain testimony," he says, "human presumption must beware how it decides in favor of either side." "We must first bend our necks to the authority of Scripture," he insists, "in order that we may arrive at knowledge and understanding through faith." And this was not merely his theory, but his practice. No theology was ever, it may be more broadly asserted, more conscientiously wrought out from the Scriptures. Is it without error? No; but its errors are on the surface, not of the essence. It leads to God, and it came from God; and in the midst of the controversies of so many ages it has shown itself an edifice whose solid core is built out of material "which cannot be shaken."¹⁶

Concluding Reflections

Here, then, is Augustine, most eminent of the Latin fathers of the church. Like all theologians and saints, he had his defects, and an essay on the defects of Augustine would doubtless paint a somewhat different picture than this essay. Most of those who take the time to get acquainted with the bishop of Hippo, however, come to feel that his faults were spots in a blazing and beautiful sun. A trophy of grace both in his life and writings, may God then continue to bless the example and the labors of his servant to us today, as we learn

through Augustine to know Augustine's God and to rejoice in the same mystery of saving grace. in *NPNF¹*, 5:lxix.

ENDNOTE

¹From Johann Nepomuk Huber, *Die Philosophie der Kirchenväter* (Munich, 1859), 312. Cited in Philip Schaff, "Prolegomena" in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series 1 (hereafter *NPNF¹*) (ed. Philip Schaff; 14 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 1:9-10.

²Jerome, *Apology against Rufinus* 2.17.

³Augustine, *Confessions* 8.28-9 in vol. 1 of *NPNF¹* (trans. J. G. Pilkington)

⁴Prosper, *Letter to Rufinus* 3 and 18.

⁵Quoted in Seraphim Rose, *The Place of Blessed Augustine in the Orthodox Church* (rev. ed.; Wildwood, CA: St. Xenia Skete, 1997), 80.

⁶Schaff, "Prolegomena," 11-12.

⁷Augustine, *Confessions* 10.8-9.

⁸Philip Schaff, "Editor's Preface" in *NPNF¹*, 2:5.

⁹Augustine, *City of God* 15.4 in vol. 2 of *NPNF¹* (trans. Marcus Dods)

¹⁰Marcus Dods, "Translator's Preface" in *NPNF¹*, 2:xiii-xiv.

¹¹Augustine, *On the Predestination of the Saints* 27 in vol. 5 of *NPNF¹* (trans. Peter Holmes and Robert Ernest Wallis).

¹²James Orr, *The Progress of Dogma: Being the Elliot Lectures, Delivered at the Western Theological Seminary, Allegheny, Penna., U.S.A., 1897* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 243.

¹³*Ibid.*, 136.

¹⁴C. H. Surgeon, from the sermon "Sovereign Grace and Man's Responsibility," 1 August 1858.

¹⁵Augustine, *On the Gift of Perseverance* 62 in vol. 5 of *NPNF¹*.

¹⁶B. B. Warfield, "Introductory Essay on Augustin and the Pelagian Controversy"