

AUGUSTINE

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There are those who believe that Augustine is the father of Protestantism. He greatly influenced such figures as Luther and Calvin, particularly Calvin

Aurelius Augustine was a native of Roman North Africa. He was born on 13 November 354 and was to become known as Augustine of Hippo. His mother, Monica, had Christian leanings but his father, Patricius, was a Roman officer and decidedly pagan. At the age of 16, Augustine left for Rome to study rhetoric hoping to become a lawyer. He also studied secular philosophy reading Cicero and Plato and abandoned any interest he may have had in theology. He took a mistress and they lived together for fifteen years and in 372 she bore him a son, Adeonatus.

Augustine was a very worldly man and entangled with all sorts of philosophy. He imbibed Manichaeism which was to become a foundation both of Buddhism and the religion of the Tang dynasty of China. But he became disillusioned with the secular and all this great learning did not satisfy him. He was now searching for the truth. It was reading a passage in Romans in his garden that encouraged him to seek God. He was baptised at Easter 387 together with his son.

Later that year he returned to North Africa where he organised a semi-monastic community based on prayer, study and discussion. His reputation spread and in 391 he travelled to Hippo to hear Bishop Valerius preach. Augustine determined to become a priest and in 396 succeeded Valerius as Bishop of Hippo.

This new bishop was a prolific writer on philosophy, history, Christian doctrine, grace, the Trinity, the Church and, perhaps, surprisingly, sex and marriage. He abandoned Manichaeism stating that God was the sole source of creation. He stated that the Church was holy not because its members were perfect but because its purposes were; he acknowledged the authority of the State provided it truly recognised God and administered Divine justice. He always opposed the death penalty.

But he has some controversial ideas. His teaching that sin was transmitted through sexual intercourse has been questioned. It was Augustine that advocated that unbaptised infants were automatically damned and this is why, for centuries, sickly babies were baptised at home so that they could enter Heaven. This was the doctrine of baptismal regeneration... that is to say that one was permanently saved if baptised due to the faith of the Church.

From this came the teaching of christening which meant that the child became both a member of the Church and of Paradise. But this was in contradiction of Augustine's teaching on predestination and election which taught that God had chosen before the foundation of the world who He was going to save and who He had rejected. This doctrine was taken up by Calvin.

Augustine believed that salvation is only possible and indeed exclusive to those whom God predestined and that no one has a say in their salvation. Such election presupposes Divine favouritism and that God is not merciful but fickle. No wonder great theologians like Erasmus and Arminius opposed this doctrine and did so by the use of Scriptures showing the true character of God.

It should be noted that Augustine was an amillennialist. He did not believe in the thousand year reign of Christ on earth and said that this millennium was the present Christian era and therefore happening in his own time. Current believers were reigning with Christ over the earth.

The marriage ceremony in the Book of Common Prayer draws on Augustine's thoughts. There are no New Testament guidelines.

Augustine died on 28 August 430 at Hippo while the city was under siege by the Vandals.

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