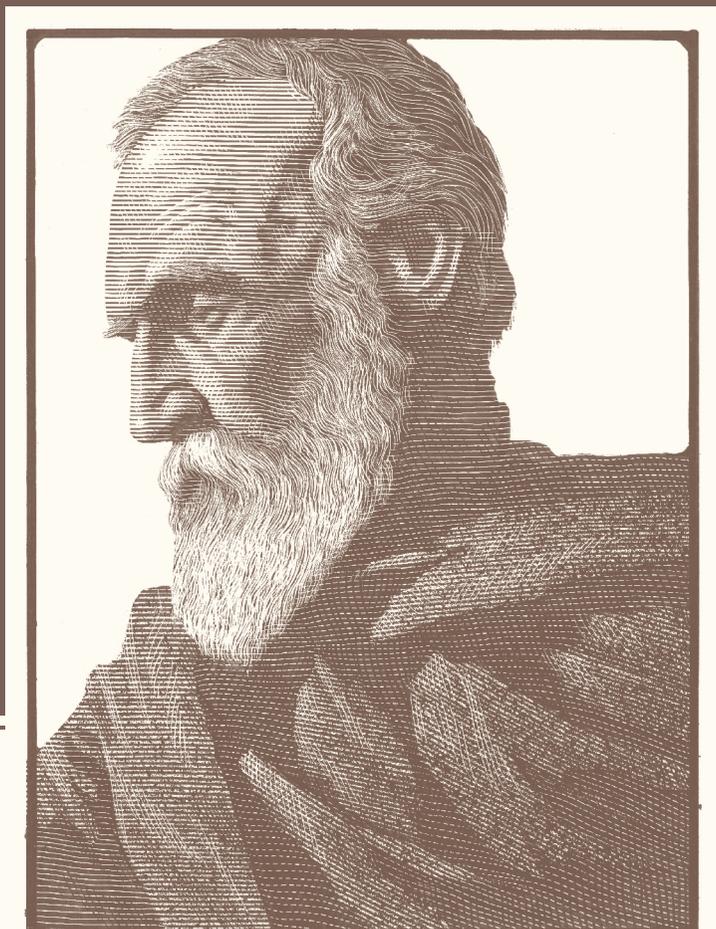


GERALD BRAY



AUGUSTINE

on the Christian Life

TRANSFORMED BY THE POWER OF GOD

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“Augustine told us that only God can be enjoyed for his own sake; all others must be considered as they relate to God. How fitting that Gerald Bray leads us to consider Augustine not for his own sake, but as a gateway to a vision of the one true God and the life lived more deeply in his triune presence. With a teacher’s wisdom and a scholar’s facility with the primary texts, Bray helps guide readers more deeply into the Christian life through the great bishop’s interaction with a host of challenges—real, cruel threats to Christian faithfulness—ranging from the Manichaeans to the Donatists and the Pelagians. Take up and read, and let Bray take you to school.”

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AUGUSTINE

on the Christian Life

THEOLOGIANS ON THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

EDITED BY STEPHEN J. NICHOLS AND JUSTIN TAYLOR

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AUGUSTINE

on the Christian Life

TRANSFORMED BY THE POWER OF GOD

GERALD BRAY

 **CROSSWAY**
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For M. R. W.

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SERIES PREFACE

Some might call us spoiled. We live in an era of significant and substantial resources for Christians on living the Christian life. We have ready access to books, DVD series, online material, seminars—all in the interest of encouraging us in our daily walk with Christ. The laity, the people in the pew, have access to more information than scholars dreamed of having in previous centuries.

Yet for all our abundance of resources, we also lack something. We tend to lack the perspectives from the past, perspectives from a different time and place than our own. To put the matter differently, we have so many riches in our current horizon that we tend not to look to the horizons of the past.

That is unfortunate, especially when it comes to learning about and practicing discipleship. It's like owning a mansion and choosing to live in only one room. This series invites you to explore the other rooms.

As we go exploring, we will visit places and times different from our own. We will see different models, approaches, and emphases. This series does not intend for these models to be copied uncritically, and it certainly does not intend to put these figures from the past high upon a pedestal like some race of super-Christians. This series intends, however, to help us in the present listen to the past. We believe there is wisdom in the past twenty centuries of the church, wisdom for living the Christian life.

Stephen J. Nichols and Justin Taylor

PREFACE

Augustine is, by any standard, one of the giants of world civilization. His writings continue to be read and studied from every conceivable angle. New editions and translations of his Latin works appear with great regularity, and the amount of secondary literature about him is more than any one person can hope to master.

This book is part of a series that focuses on the Christian life, a subject that was dear to Augustine's heart and motivated his preaching and teaching ministry but has been curiously neglected in recent years. For whatever reason, scholars have concentrated on his philosophy, his theology, and increasingly his biblical interpretation, but have had relatively little to say about his spiritual development and devotional teaching.

It is impossible to write about him without touching on the different aspects of his life and work, including the controversies in which he was engaged and that did so much to draw out the depths of his thinking. But as far as possible, these things are kept in the background here so that the man and his all-important relationship with God can occupy the center stage that he himself wanted it to have. In this book, every effort is made to let Augustine speak for himself and to understand him on his own terms, however uncongenial they may seem to many people today. Sympathy for him grows out of understanding, and that understanding can only come with listening to his voice and putting ourselves, as much as we can, in his shoes.

The selections from his writings that are quoted here have been freshly translated into contemporary (and as much as possible, colloquial) English. Augustine himself used the spoken word to teach his congregation at Hippo and put effective communication with them ahead of any literary

pretensions. I hope that readers who are approaching him for the first time will be encouraged to go further and learn more about this fascinating man, while those who are already familiar with him may be challenged to see him in a new light. Above all, I devoutly desire that all who come to Augustine may be led through him to a deeper understanding and closer relationship with the God of Jesus Christ, to whom he was drawn and in whose service he spent the greater part of his life. It is for that, above all, that we remember him today, and it is only in the light of Christ that his career and his writings can be understood as he meant them to be.

The details of Augustine's life are known mainly from what he tells us himself, or from what his disciple and biographer Possidius has told us. Modern scholars generally accept this information as factual, and it is seldom if ever questioned. For more precise details, see Allan Fitzgerald, *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), and Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A New Biography* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000).

AUGUSTINE'S LATIN TITLES AND THEIR ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS

It is customary to refer to Augustine's works by their Latin titles, a practice followed in the notes to this book. One reason for this is that a number of his works do not have English titles, and some have more than one, which can cause confusion. On the other hand, the Latin titles are standard and universally recognized. Many of them are similar to their English equivalents, as can be seen from the following list of works referred to in this volume. Note that the Latin *de* (on) is often omitted in English translation, as is the word *liber/libri* (book/books), which is usually found in the full Latin titles, as for example, *De Trinitate libri XV* (*Fifteen Books on the Trinity*).

Latin

Adnotationes in Job

Ad Simplicianum

Bibliotheca Casinensis

Confessiones

Contra academicos

Contra Adimantum

Contra epistulam Parmeniani Donatistae

Contra epistulam Manichaei fundamentalem

Contra Faustum

English

Notes on Job

To Simplician

Library of Casiciacum

Confessions

Against the Academics

Against Adimantius

Against the Letters of Parmenian the Donatist

No English equivalent (*Against the Teaching of the Manichees*)

Against Faustus

Latin	English
<i>Contra Iulianum</i>	<i>Against Julian (of Eclanum)</i>
<i>Contra litteras Petiliani Donatistae</i>	<i>Against the Letters of Petilian, the Donatist</i>
<i>Contra Maximinum Arianum</i>	<i>Against Maximinus the Arian</i>
<i>De anima et eius origine</i>	<i>On the Origin of the Soul</i>
<i>De baptismo</i>	<i>On Baptism</i>
<i>De beata vita</i>	<i>On the Blessed Life</i>
<i>De bono coniugali</i>	<i>On the Good of Marriage</i>
<i>De catechizandis rudibus</i>	<i>On the Elements of Christian Instruction</i>
<i>De civitate Dei</i>	<i>On the City of God</i>
<i>De correptione Donatistarum</i>	<i>On the Punishment of the Donatists</i>
<i>De correptione et gratia</i>	<i>On Punishment and Grace</i>
<i>De doctrina Christiana</i>	<i>On Christian Doctrine (Teaching)</i>
<i>De dono perseverantiae</i>	<i>On the Gift of Perseverance</i>
<i>De fide et symbolo</i>	<i>On Faith and the Creed</i>
<i>De Genesi ad litteram</i>	<i>A Literal Commentary on Genesis</i>
<i>De Genesi adversus Manichaeos</i>	<i>On Genesis against the Manichees</i>
<i>De Genesi liber imperfectus</i>	<i>Incomplete Commentary on Genesis</i>
<i>De gratia</i>	<i>On Grace</i>
<i>De gratia Christi et de peccato originali</i>	<i>On the Grace of Christ and Original Sin</i>
<i>De gratia et libero arbitrio</i>	<i>On Grace and Free Will</i>
<i>De libero arbitrio</i>	<i>On Free Will</i>
<i>De mendacio</i>	<i>On Lying</i>
<i>De moribus ecclesiae catholicae et de moribus Manichaeorum</i>	<i>On the Customs of the Catholic Church and Those of the Manichees</i>
<i>De natura boni contra Manichaeos</i>	<i>On the Nature of Good, against the Manichees</i>
<i>De natura et gratia</i>	<i>On Nature and Grace</i>
<i>De ordine</i>	<i>On Providence (Order)</i>
<i>De peccatorum meritis et remissione et de baptismo parvulorum</i>	<i>On the Merits of Sinners and Forgiveness and on the Baptism of Infants</i>
<i>De praedestinatione sanctorum</i>	<i>On the Predestination of the Saints</i>
<i>De sancta virginitate</i>	<i>On Holy Virginity</i>
<i>De spiritu et littera</i>	<i>On the Spirit and the Letter</i>
<i>De symbolo ad catechumenos</i>	<i>On the Creed, for Those Preparing for Baptism</i>
<i>De Trinitate</i>	<i>On the Trinity</i>
<i>De unitate ecclesiae</i>	<i>On the Unity of the Church</i>

Latin	English
<i>De urbis excidio</i>	<i>On the Fall of the City (of Rome)</i>
<i>De utilitate credendi</i>	<i>On the Benefits of Believing</i>
<i>De utilitate ieiunii</i>	<i>On the Benefits of Fasting</i>
<i>De vera religione</i>	<i>On True Religion</i>
<i>Enarrationes in Psalmos</i>	<i>Expositions of the Psalms</i>
<i>Enchiridion</i>	No English equivalent (<i>Handbook</i>)
<i>Epistulae</i>	<i>Letters</i>
<i>Epistulae ad Romanos inchoata expositio</i>	<i>Unfinished Commentary on Romans</i>
<i>Expositio epistulae ad Galatas</i>	<i>Commentary on Galatians</i>
<i>Expositio quarundam propositionum ex epistula ad Romanos</i>	<i>Exposition of Some Statements from the Epistle to the Romans</i>
<i>Homiliae decem in Iohannis Evangelium</i>	<i>Ten Sermons on the Gospel of John</i>
<i>Locutiones in Heptateuchum</i>	<i>Expressions in the Heptateuch</i>
<i>Post collationem contra Donatistas</i>	<i>Against the Donatists after the Council</i>
<i>Quaestiones Evangeliorum</i>	<i>Questions about the Gospels</i>
<i>Quaestiones in Heptateuchum</i>	<i>Questions about the Heptateuch</i>
<i>Retractationes</i>	<i>Retractions</i>
<i>Sermo ad Caesareae ecclesiae plebem</i>	<i>Sermon to the People of the Church of Caesarea</i>
<i>Sermones</i>	<i>Sermons</i>
<i>Sermones Wilmartiani</i>	<i>Wilmart Sermons</i>
<i>Tractatus in Evangelium Ioannis</i>	<i>Treatises (Sermons) on John's Gospel</i>
<i>Tractatus in epistulam Ioannis ad Parthos</i>	<i>Treatises (Sermons) on 1 John</i>

CHAPTER I

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF AUGUSTINE

Augustine's Life

Aurelius Augustinus, the man we call Augustine, was born on November 13, 354, in the small North African town of Thagaste, known today as Souk Ahras (Algeria). Then, as now, it was inhabited by Berbers, tribesmen who were the original inhabitants of North Africa and who have blended in with their various conquerors over the centuries without being totally assimilated by any of them. In the Roman Empire, the Berbers of Thagaste spoke Latin and lived like Romans, but they remained attached to their native soil and to customs that would survive after the empire disappeared. Augustine himself was brought up as a Roman—Latin-speaking and imbued with the culture and values of the imperial city. But he was detached enough from Rome that when it fell to the barbarians in AD 410, he was able to see it for what it was—a passing phase in human history that would vanish just as Nineveh and Babylon had disappeared centuries before.

Augustine was the son of a pagan father called Patricius and a Christian mother by the name of Monica. They were most likely of Berber origin, though there may have been an admixture of Italian stock in their background, and they were certainly Romanized. We do not know how they met and married, but most likely they were betrothed by their families at a young age. Whether Monica was a Christian when that happened we do not know, nor can we say what led her parents (if they were Christians) to give their daughter to a pagan husband. What seems almost certain is that

it was not a love match but a social calculation. Patricius was a civil servant, a respectable and well-paid position that made him a man of some importance in a small agricultural village. Monica's family no doubt thought it was a good idea for them to have connections to the government, and they knew that their daughter would be well provided for. They could also hope that in time Patricius would be converted to Christ.

Christianity had been legalized in the Roman Empire in AD 313, not long before Patricius was born, and its influence was steadily growing. There was as yet no requirement that government officials should be Christians, and many were not, but the church was no longer persecuted, and Monica was free to practice her faith. What she could not do was pass it on to her children (and especially not to her male children) because in the ancient world a boy followed the religion of his father. But as Augustine tells us himself, that did not prevent her from bringing him up in a way that made him familiar with Christianity. She took him to church with her and even enrolled him as a "catechumen" (apprentice) in what was the fourth-century equivalent of Sunday school. However, she could not have him baptized without his father's permission, although she almost did when the young Augustine developed a fever and seemed to be close to death. At that point he himself cried out to be baptized.

You saw, my God, because you were already my guardian, with what fervor of mind and with what faith I begged for the baptism of your Christ, my God and Lord, urging it on the devotion of my mother and of the mother of us all, the church. My physical mother . . . hastily made arrangements for me to be initiated and washed in the sacraments of salvation. . . . But suddenly I recovered. My cleansing was deferred on the assumption that, if I lived, I would be sure to soil myself; and . . . my guilt would be greater and more dangerous.¹

At home Augustine's mother sang hymns to him and prayed over him, leaving an indelible impression on his mind. In later years he would recall his early upbringing and praise his mother for the teaching and example she gave him even when he was too young to appreciate what she was doing.

But strong though his attachment was to his mother, Augustine was a man who was expected to live in a man's world. For the son of Patricius that meant getting a good education and rising in the imperial administration,

¹ *Confessiones* 1.11.17.

which was the most secure and prestigious form of employment known to him. Augustine could not get what he needed in Thagaste, so when he was eleven years old he was sent to board in Madaura, a larger town about twenty miles to the south, which was known for its excellent schools. He stayed there for about four years, but had to return home when his father died. Patricius had accepted Christ as his Savior shortly before his death, but although in later years Augustine rejoiced at that, it made little impression on him at the time. There was nothing for him to do back home, and after a year he was sent to Carthage for further education, paid for by a certain Romanianus, who was a wealthy friend of the family.

Carthage (now a suburb of Tunis), was the capital of Roman Africa and the second city in the western half of the empire. It could not compete with Rome or with the great urban centers of the East, like Alexandria and Antioch, but it had a famous history and had long been an important center of Latin culture. The education Augustine got there was as good as any that could be had in the ancient world, and there was no need for him to go elsewhere. He was already well versed in the classics of Latin literature and had mastered the art of rhetoric (public speaking) that was essential for anyone who wanted to make a career in the ancient world. He had also studied Greek, but that language was not spoken in North Africa, and Augustine was not a gifted linguist. For him, Greek remained essentially a textbook language, which was a disadvantage to him as a Christian theologian. He had no trouble establishing himself as a teacher of philosophy and rhetoric at Carthage, but in later years his weakness in Greek would be held against him by men like Jerome (ca. 330–410), who was a brilliant linguist and translated the Bible into Latin, not only from Greek but from Hebrew as well. Augustine could not compete with that and remained dependent on translations of the Scriptures that were often of poor quality, which is surprising considering how central the Bible was to his preaching and teaching ministry.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. On arriving in Carthage, Augustine quickly settled into student life. He spent much of his time at the theater, where he reveled in the romantic lives of the stage characters. He had an exceptional love of music and drama, and his appetite for romance was whetted as well. Before long he acquired a mistress—her name is one of the few things about his life that we do not know—who bore him a son before he was eighteen years old. It is interesting to note that although he

was not even formally a Christian at this stage, he called his son Adeodatus (“given by God”), the Latin equivalent of the Greek Theodoros (Theodore). Years later, after his conversion, he sent his mistress away but he kept his son, who was very precious to him.

Not long after this, as he was honing his rhetorical skills by reading Cicero’s *Hortensius*—a work now lost—Augustine was struck by the beauty not only of Cicero’s language but also of his ideas, and he fell in love with philosophy. Among the many religious and philosophical groups that competed for attention in Carthage was the sect of the Manichees, named for a Persian prophet called Mani who had lived in the borderlands between the Roman Empire and Persia about 150 years before Augustine’s time. Mani was eclectic in his tastes, borrowing a lot from the Persian religion of Zoroastrianism, various strands of Greek philosophy, and even Christianity. He was the “New Age” guru of his time, and his ideas suited the young Augustine perfectly. They were black-and-white in a way that the more sophisticated philosophies of the Greeks were not. Like Zoroaster, Mani believed that the world was divided into absolute good and absolute evil—two equal powers that did battle for the soul of man. He claimed to be rational, offering an explanation for every problem, but he skated over contradictions and untidy facts that did not fit his scheme of things. For someone who wanted intellectual assurance without taking the trouble to become truly educated, Mani offered the perfect belief system, and there were many who joined the Manichees for that reason.

The Manichees prided themselves on their knowledge of natural science and thought that they could use it to fight the power of evil. Regarding spirit as good and matter as evil, they claimed to have a higher form of knowledge, but at the same time they indulged their fleshly appetites in what Augustine later came to see was hypocritical debauchery. Far from achieving a balanced approach to life, they swung from one extreme to another because they were unable to judge good and evil for what they really were or cling to the former in order to subdue the latter.²

Augustine spent nine years in the company of the Manichees but became increasingly disenchanted with them when he realized that their great teacher, a man called Faustus, was unable to answer his most pressing questions.³ He grew restless in Carthage, having reached the summit

² See *Confessiones* 3.6.10, 8.10.22–24.

³ *Confessiones* 5.6.10–5.7.13.

of what it had to offer, and began to feel the pull of Rome. Eventually he left for the imperial capital, much against his mother's wishes, and tried to set himself up as a teacher there. Unfortunately for him, nothing seemed to work out as he intended. No sooner had he arrived in Rome than he fell seriously ill, and it was some time before he could establish himself as a teacher. He was mocked for his provincial accent, and although the students he attracted were better than those in Carthage, they suffered from a fatal defect—they were reluctant to pay their fees. Intellectually, Augustine was still moving in Manichaean circles, but he was attracted to the so-called New Academy, a group of skeptical thinkers who questioned everything and claimed that the search for truth was a waste of time because absolute truth did not exist. This appealed to Augustine's disillusionment with the Manichees and helped him to escape from their clutches, but it did not provide much of a substitute. Like skeptics in every age, the New Academics knew what they were against but not what they were for, so they could never provide an honest seeker after truth like Augustine with the peace of mind that he craved.

Before long, Augustine left Rome for Milan, which was then the seat of the Roman emperor in the West and a city of great importance. Augustine arrived there in 384 and soon came across the local bishop. This was Ambrose (ca. 339–397), a former prefect (mayor) of the city who had been chosen by popular acclaim to be its bishop ten years earlier, even though he was still a layman at the time. Ordained deacon, presbyter, and bishop overnight, Ambrose had quickly established himself as the leading moral and spiritual authority in the Latin world. He did not flatter those in power but castigated them—something that nobody had previously had the courage to do. Even the emperors were shamed into doing his bidding, so strong was his personality and sense of mission. Moreover, Ambrose was a master of rhetoric whose command of logic impressed even Augustine. Before long, Augustine found himself going to hear Ambrose preach. For the first time, Augustine came to see that Christianity made sense and had answers to the questions he had put to the Manichees in vain. He was gradually coming round to Christianity, but two things stood in his way: his inability to think of God as a spiritual being who had created a world that was fundamentally good, and his unwillingness to adopt a moral lifestyle.

The first of these problems was largely resolved by Platonism, which

Augustine now encountered for the first time though the translations made by Marius Victorinus, a Platonic philosopher who had become a Christian. Platonism went back to Plato, who had lived at Athens in the fourth century BC,⁴ but it had been revived in a modified form about a century before Augustine was born by an Alexandrian called Plotinus (ca. 204–270) and his disciple Porphyry (ca. 234–ca. 305). Plotinus is credited with having turned what was essentially an academic philosophy into a kind of religion that would enable those who pursued it not only to understand but also to experience the supreme being. Whether Plotinus was influenced by Christianity has been debated, but in the marketplace of ideas there is no doubt that his Neoplatonism (as we now call it) competed with the gospel for the hearts and minds of men. This is especially clear from the writings of Porphyry, many of which were direct attacks on Christianity. For that reason, they are now almost entirely lost because Christian scribes of later times saw no reason to copy them (and every reason to destroy them); but they circulated freely in Augustine's day and made it easy for intellectuals to look down on the faith taught by Jesus. Augustine was in no mood for that, though, and it seems that what he took from the Neoplatonists was the positive teaching of Plotinus rather than the critical views of Porphyry.

Plotinus solved the problem of evil for Augustine by persuading him that it had no real existence of its own.⁵ According to him, every created thing is good in itself because it has been made by the supreme being, which cannot make or do anything that is foreign to its nature. Evil is therefore a defect—the absence or perversion of what is good—not a power or substance in its own right. While absorbing this doctrine, Augustine was also reading John's Gospel, which to Augustine's mind sounded very much like the teaching of Plotinus. The big difference was that John spoke of the nonmaterial Word of God becoming flesh, something that a Platonist could not contemplate.⁶ Plotinus also taught Augustine the value of self-examination. Rather than look for answers in the stars or in nature, a man should look into his own soul and test the witness of his conscience. This was to become one of the most significant ways in which Augustine would discover truth as a Christian, and so it is important to understand how it first came into his life.

⁴ Augustine believed, as many early Christians did, that Plato knew the Hebrew Bible and had been influenced by it. See *De doctrina Christiana* 2.28.43; *De civitate Dei* 8.11.

⁵ *Confessiones* 7.10.16–7.13.19.

⁶ *Confessiones* 7.9.14.

Augustine was now well on the way to joining the church, but there were still hurdles that he had to surmount. His mother persuaded him to abandon his mistress, but she wanted to find him a suitable wife instead. She managed to identify a ten-year-old, underage girl who was more than twenty years Augustine's junior, and he was understandably unenthusiastic about her. Instead of that, Augustine tried to persuade some of his friends to set up a kind of commune where they could study philosophy in peace, but his mother objected to the idea, and it foundered when the others pulled out because they did not want to abandon their wives or potential wives. Augustine was torn between what he saw as incompatible alternatives: either he could marry and settle down like everyone else, or he could live a solitary life, which he did not want to do. He even took another concubine, impatient with his mother's drawn-out plans for his future marriage, but that was no solution and the arrangement did not last long.

At this point in his life Augustine needed someone to talk to, and he found help from one of Ambrose's assistants, an old man called Simplicianus. Simplicianus listened as Augustine recounted his doubts and fears, and was able to share experiences of his own, including the remarkable conversion of Marius Victorinus, which he had witnessed some years before in Rome. Another powerful influence on him at this time was that of Ponticianus, who was also from North Africa. Ponticianus introduced Augustine to monasticism, which was only then making its appearance in Italy, although it had been flourishing in Egypt for more than a century. Thanks to him, Augustine met people who had given up great careers and positions in the world and sought peace of mind in the simplicity and renunciation associated with the solitary life. What others saw as madness, they thought of as heroic self-sacrifice, and Augustine felt ashamed that he was unwilling to follow them in this.

Filled with a growing sense of his personal inadequacy and realizing how empty his life had so far been, Augustine fell into a state of despair. He was torn between the monastic ideal, on the one hand, and the pleasures of this world, on the other—wanting to embrace the former but finding it too hard to abandon the latter. It was when he was in this condition that he heard a child's voice say: *Tolle, lege* (Take up and read). Somewhat confused, he reached for a portion of the Scriptures that he had to hand and read: "Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put

on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires” (Rom. 13:13–14).⁷

The dam of his pent-up emotions broke and he surrendered his life to Christ. The change was immediate and long-lasting, but the implications took time to sink in. He enrolled in baptismal preparation classes, intending to be baptized at the next Easter baptismal ceremony (in 387). He still had several months to prepare for that, and during that time Augustine went into retreat at a place called Cassiciacum, where he began to write a series of treatises that would help to define his later life. One of the most interesting of these is the first account of his conversion, written while it was fresh in his memory and reflecting the simplicity of a man who was still absorbing the implications of the experience.⁸

After being baptized, Augustine decided to return to Africa with his mother, who had come to Italy sometime before in search of her son. As they were waiting for the boat, Monica caught a fever and died, content that she had been privileged to see Augustine finally won for Christ. Augustine postponed his departure for a year and used the time to write against the Manichees, to whom he had previously been so close.⁹ Then in 388 he went back to Thagaste with a few friends, determined to make amends to those whom he had previously misled with his Manichaeism and to establish a monastic community in his birthplace. It was shortly after he got home that Adeodatus died, at which point Augustine’s life changed again. In 391 he went on a short visit to Hippo Regius, a coastal city now known as Annaba (Algeria). He went to church, where the bishop, an old man called Valerius, spotted him and began to tell people that he, Valerius, needed an assistant. The congregation knew that Augustine was the right choice, and they thrust him forward for ordination, something that he had never sought. Augustine gave in to their wishes and was soon ordained. Valerius was a Greek who spoke poor Latin, so he asked Augustine to preach in his stead, while at the same time permitting him to establish a small monastery next to the cathedral.¹⁰

Augustine soon established a clergy training school and created an office for himself, where he quickly turned out a whole series of tracts de-

⁷ See *Confessiones* 8.12.29 for the full account.

⁸ *De beata vita* 4.

⁹ This was his *De moribus ecclesiae catholicae et de moribus Manichaeorum*, a work in three books.

¹⁰ Some people have thought that Valerius spoke better Latin than he was prepared to admit. He wanted Augustine to succeed him and may have used the language question as a means of compelling him to stay in Hippo.

fending mainline Christianity against the Manichees and the Donatists, a schismatic sect that had broken away from the church two generations before because of its stricter views on church discipline. The Manichees were relatively easy to refute, and they had no real following outside intellectual circles in the big cities, but the Donatists were another matter. They had penetrated very deeply into the countryside, where they had split the church, even in small towns like Thagaste. In order to combat them effectively, Augustine had to develop a doctrine of the church that accounted for imperfection within it without giving the impression that sinfulness should be tolerated. Like the Manichees, the Donatists were black-and-white people who found any kind of subtlety difficult, and their appeal to rid the church of its corrupt members was often welcome to those who felt they were being forced to tolerate low standards of spiritual life. Augustine did not condemn Donatist beliefs (which were theologically orthodox), but concentrated on the negative impact their separatism was having on the wider church. He wanted them to come back into fellowship with the main body of believers, though his success in this endeavor was somewhat limited. In 411 he attended a council held at Carthage whose main purpose was to reconcile the Donatists to the mainline church. In theory it was successful and many Donatists returned to the fold, but by then antagonisms had gone too deep to be eradicated overnight. Donatism limped on in a weakened state, but it did not finally disappear until the entire North African church was engulfed by the tide of Islam in the late seventh century.¹¹

In 395 Valerius, fearing that some other city would get Augustine as its bishop, persuaded the church at Hippo to consecrate Augustine to that office, even though Valerius was still alive. Augustine hesitated but finally gave in to the pleas of the people, who did not want to lose him. When Valerius died the following year, Augustine was already in post, and he remained there until his death on August 28, 430. He is called Augustine of Hippo (not Thagaste) because that is where he was bishop, a practice that is almost universal when speaking of the fathers of the early church who held episcopal office. His first few years as a bishop were fairly uneventful (apart from the ongoing controversy with the Donatists), but in 410 Rome was sacked by the Goths, and once again Augustine's life changed forever.

As refugees poured into Africa from Italy, bringing lurid stories of the

¹¹ On Donatism, see W. H. C. Frend, *The Donatist Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952); Maureen A. Tilley, *The Bible in Christian North Africa: The Donatist World* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1997).

destruction they had witnessed, Augustine became alarmed by the readiness of some to blame the disaster on Christianity. Had the old gods been kept, these people argued, they would have protected Rome, which was now suffering the consequences of having abandoned them. Augustine could hardly sit back and let such a challenge go unanswered, and so he began writing the greatest book of his career—*The City of God*, a massive work in which he reconstructed the history of the world. In it, Augustine tried to show that current events are the outworking of God's eternal plan. In the end all earthly powers will collapse and fall, but the city of God, the kingdom of heaven, will go on forever. The fight between good and evil takes different forms, said Augustine, but Christians know what side they are on. They are neither Romans nor barbarians, but citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem that will descend on the last day when Christ returns to establish his everlasting rule.

Among the refugees in Carthage were some who had imbibed the teaching of Pelagius (ca. 354–ca. 418), a British monk who had gone to Rome, where he had been preaching that the human race was not entirely sinful. According to Pelagius, there was a residue of uncorrupted goodness in every man that, if it were properly nurtured, could win a soul back to God. In response to this, Augustine developed his ideas about grace and predestination, which have remained fundamental for Western theology ever since. Augustine spent many years warning the world of the dangers of Pelagianism, which soon attracted widespread condemnation, but Pelagius also had his defenders, the most articulate of whom was Julian of Eclanum, who had been banished from Italy because of it. Julian attacked Augustine quite openly and viciously, and Augustine replied by refuting his treatises one at a time, leaving only two of them still unanswered at his death.

In 426, sensing that his days were numbered, Augustine chose a certain Heraclius as his successor, and the two men governed the church together for the next few years. During that time, Augustine went over his earlier writings, correcting them and noting where he had changed his mind since first writing them. It was a remarkable performance, and like so many things in his life, it was an exercise that was without precedent in the ancient world.

Augustine died when Hippo was under siege by the Vandals, a Germanic tribe that had crossed through Spain into North Africa. A few days after he passed away, the city surrendered, and by the end of the year the

Vandals had set up a kingdom of their own in Carthage. It survived for just over a century, until the Roman general Belisarius, acting on orders from Constantinople, retook the city and the province. The empire came back for a further 150 years, but in 698 Carthage fell to the Muslim Arabs who have ruled it almost uninterruptedly ever since. But long before that happened, the Africa that Augustine knew had disappeared. His colleague Heraclius seems to have been the last bishop of Hippo, and after his time the whole area went into decline. Fortunately for us, there was a brief respite in the decade following Augustine's death, when one of his associates, a man called Possidius, was able to write a biography of him, using materials that were still extant in the library there. By then, Augustine's writings were being copied and circulated all over the Latin world, so the eclipse of Roman culture in North Africa was not the end of his influence. But the world he knew had changed forever, and it is no exaggeration to say that with his death, the great days of the North African church came to a close. Augustine would become the teacher of western Europe, not of Africa, and it is in that role that his historical importance was to lie.

Augustine's Writings

No ancient Christian writer has left us a larger corpus of writings than Augustine. His only rival in this respect is Origen (ca. 185–ca. 254), who may have written more than he did, though on a narrower range of subjects. But Origen was condemned as a heretic three hundred years after his death, and his books were either destroyed or no longer copied; so what we now have is only a small portion of what he actually wrote. That fate never befell Augustine. Some of Augustine's works have been lost, and there is a small amount of material that circulates under his name but is probably (or certainly) not his. But that still leaves over a hundred books that have survived and are undoubtedly his, plus 307 known letters and 583 sermons, which were transcribed for publication by those who heard them. An average of three books a year is a remarkable output for anyone to have achieved over a lifetime, and quite outstanding when we realize that they had to be written and copied out by hand and that Augustine had none of the modern scholar's resources at his disposal. That he should have made occasional mistakes or written something rather unmemorable is hardly surprising. The truly astonishing thing is how much he got right and how much of his work is still influential today. Whether you like him or loathe

him—and Augustine has had his detractors as well as his admirers—there can be no doubt of his greatness or of the very long shadow he has cast over European culture down through the ages.

In cataloging his many writings, it is best to subdivide them according to the type of literature they are, as follows.

Autobiographical

Augustine was one of the few people in antiquity who wrote at great length about himself. In the Christian world, only the apostle Paul revealed as much of his own spiritual journey as Augustine did, and Paul only did so in passing as the subject came up in his epistles. Augustine, by contrast, sat down deliberately to write his autobiography, which no Christian and relatively few pagans had ever done before him.

His first foray into this field came immediately after his conversion, in the *Dialogues*, which he wrote between his conversion and his ordination in 391.¹² Intended as philosophical works, the *Dialogues* nevertheless contain much introductory autobiographical material that helps us to understand his mental and spiritual state when he was processing his conversion and preparing himself for baptism.

His most important autobiographical work was his *Confessions*, which he started writing soon after becoming a bishop and finished around 400. The *Confessions* are the most popular of his writings and are still widely read today because of the deep insight they give us not only into his character, but into the process of religious conversion in general. They are structured as a meditation offered to God, a kind of extended prayer in which Augustine confesses his many sins and failures. In that sense they are a searing self-examination in which outwardly trivial events (like stealing pears from a tree when he was young) become important episodes in his spiritual journey, revealing to him the depth of his sinfulness and the overwhelming need he felt for the grace of God to forgive and restore him.

The *Confessions* cover his life from birth to the death of his mother, shortly after his baptism, and they are a major source for our knowledge of his spiritual development. To them must be added his *Retractions*, written late in life (426–427) and reexamining his work in the light of his growth as a Christian. They are as close as we can come to an understanding of

¹² Ten separate compositions make up the dialogues. For a list and brief explanation of them, see Angelo Di Berardino, *Patrology*, vol. 4 (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1986), 356–61.

his motives in writing and of the influences that shaped his thinking over time.¹³

In addition to these important works, there are two letters (nos. 355–356) that give us some details of his life in Africa after his return in 388 until he became a bishop eight years later. As I have already mentioned, there is also the *Life of Saint Augustine*, written by his disciple Possidius between 431 and 439, which draws on personal reminiscences and archival materials in order to provide a clear picture of Augustine's activity as bishop of Hippo.

Philosophical

Augustine was a professional philosopher before his conversion, and the effects of that can be seen in his earliest works. The *Dialogues* he composed at Cassiciacum addressed philosophical themes of different kinds. He wrote a long work against the skeptics of the New Academy, from which his conversion had rescued him.¹⁴ He was also preoccupied with the immortality of the soul, on which he wrote a good deal. He was especially concerned to reaffirm its spiritual nature and examine how it could rise to the contemplation of God, something that he regarded as foundational for living the Christian life.

Other treatises of a philosophical nature included two books in which he sought to classify reality according to hierarchical principles that he believed were inherent in things.¹⁵ He also wrote several more that ranged across all the arts known to man and tried to show how each of them could become a pathway into the knowledge of God. In addition to these he composed lengthy treatises on the question of free will, trying to explain the origin of evil, the nature of human freedom, and divine foreknowledge.¹⁶ The three books dedicated to these and similar subjects are of particular importance for the light they shed on Augustine's beliefs about predestination before the outbreak of the Pelagian controversy, when his position on the subject hardened and its finer points were clarified.¹⁷

¹³ Though they are fairly short and can be read in a few hours, there are two important commentaries on them. See James J. O'Donnell, *Augustine Confessions*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); and John M. Quinn, *A Companion to the Confessions of St. Augustine* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002).

¹⁴ *Contra academicos*, in three books.

¹⁵ *De ordine*.

¹⁶ *De libero arbitrio*, in three books.

¹⁷ There are sixteen surviving works against the Pelagians among Augustine's writings. See Di Berardino, *Patrology*, 4:386–92 for a complete list.

Also to this category belongs a charming treatise on music, which was something dear to Augustine's heart. He was deeply touched by Christian singing even before his conversion and believed that music could lead people to God if it were understood and used in the right way. Finally, there is a treatise couched in the form of a dialogue with his son, Adeodatus, which is an interesting study in the educational methods he thought ought to be used with children.

Exegetical

Considering the volume of his works, Augustine was not a great commentator on Scripture, but given the centrality of the Bible for the life of the church, it would have been hard for him not to have written at least some exegetical treatises, and on certain matters he could wax very eloquent. He was especially interested in hermeneutics, and one of the most important books ever written on the subject belongs to him. It is called *On Christian Doctrine*, because as far as Augustine was concerned, the Bible was the only real source of Christian teaching. It had to be read in the right way of course, and in this short but important treatise he outlined what that was. Augustine made a fundamental distinction between things meant to be used (*uti*) and things meant to be enjoyed (*frui*), and he tried to demonstrate how the Bible leads us from the former to the latter because it is a means to an end, which is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. The book is also important for the way in which it develops the idea that words are signs for things and can therefore be used in different senses, both physical and metaphorical. If it were not so, finite words could not help us know the infinite God, but of course they do, and nowhere more so than in the Bible.¹⁸

In dealing with the Old Testament, Augustine concentrated to an unusual degree on the creation story in Genesis 1–3. He commented on it no fewer than four times—twice allegorically and twice literally. His allegorical commentaries were directed chiefly against the Manichees, whom he accused of having too narrowly literalistic an interpretation of the text, and they were written first, shortly after his conversion. He later interpreted the creation account literally, but his first attempt at this, which went back to about 393, was a failure and he abandoned it. Later on, he took it up again

¹⁸ See Duane W. H. Arnold and Pamela Bright, eds., *De doctrina Christiana: A Classic of Western Culture* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995).

and over a period of about fifteen years (401–415) he composed a major exposition of the deep themes of the creation that still ranks among the more important of his works.¹⁹

Beyond his many interpretations of Genesis 1–3, Augustine also wrote on the so-called Heptateuch (the seven books from Genesis to Judges), though his two works on the subject were not so much commentaries as a series of answers to difficult exegetical questions raised by the text.²⁰ He did something similar with the book of Job.²¹ But by far the most impressive of his works on the Old Testament was his enormous *Expositions of the Psalms*, the only complete commentary on them that we possess from ancient times, which occupied him for almost a quarter of a century (392–416). The *Expositions* are not a unified whole but a mixture of exegetical notes, some longer expositions, and a huge number of sermons, including thirty-two on Psalm 119. It should be pointed out that Augustine used Latin versions of the Greek Septuagint (LXX) translation of the original Hebrew, which in the Psalms (in particular) is often quite different from the Greek. That unfortunately reduces the value of the *Expositions* as pure exegesis, but as a source of spiritual nourishment it is unparalleled in his writings. Even if what he says is not always securely grounded in the biblical text he is commenting on, the points he is making can usually be substantiated from other parts of Scripture and therefore have a genuine spiritual value in spite of the defects of the translation he was using.

In writing on the New Testament, Augustine more or less confined himself to the Gospels, Romans, James, and 1 John. He devised a harmonization of the four Gospels in order to show that they did not contradict one another, and also wrote two books on the Sermon on the Mount. His two attempts to write a commentary on Romans both failed, though fragments survive and we have a good idea of how he interpreted the epistle. His exposition of James is unfortunately lost, but his ten sermons on love, based on 1 John, are among his most appealing works.²² He also preached (or at least composed) 124 sermons on the Fourth Gospel, which, taken together, form a remarkable commentary on it that is full of rich spiritual meditation and counsel.²³

¹⁹ *De Genesi ad litteram*, in twelve books.

²⁰ *Locutiones in Heptateuchum* and *Quaestiones in Heptateuchum*, both in seven books.

²¹ *Adnotationes in Iob*.

²² *Tractatus in epistolam Iohannis ad Parthos*.

²³ *Tractatus in Evangelium Iohannis*.

Doctrinal

Much of what Augustine wrote concerned questions that arose from his study of Christian doctrine. Apart from the treatises dealing with particular controversies, which we shall look at a bit further on, he wrote a short exposition of the baptismal creed that was eventually standardized as the Apostles' Creed that is still in use today, along with several occasional pieces dealing with specific questions that had been put to him. One of the more important works of this kind is his *Handbook or Enchiridion*, which is an exposition of faith (the creed), hope (the Lord's Prayer), and love (the Ten Commandments). It was to become the basis for the education of the clergy in the Middle Ages, and in that capacity it played a major role in shaping the spiritual outlook of the Western church for over a thousand years.

The most important of his purely doctrinal writings however is his fifteen-volume work *On the Trinity*, which became the starting point of all future reflection on the subject in the Latin-speaking world. The first four books deal with the biblical evidence for the Trinity, followed by a theological construction and defense of the doctrine (bks. 5–7), an introduction to the mystical experience of God (bk. 8), a search for the image of the Trinity in human psychology (bks. 9–14), and a concluding summary of the whole treatise (bk. 15). Augustine was the first to develop the idea that the image of God in which we are created is an image of the Trinity, which he compared to the memory, intellect, and will inherent in the human brain. Because of this, Augustine is often regarded as the founder of modern psychology, as well as a theologian of the first rank, and his ideas on the subject are widely studied even by people who have no particular interest in Christianity.²⁴

It should be pointed out before we move on that Augustine never wrote a systematic theology in the way we understand that now. This was not because he never got round to it, but because systematic theologies were unknown in his time. The first person to write anything resembling one was John of Damascus (d. 749), who wrote in Greek. No Latin writer attempted anything similar until Peter Lombard (ca. 1090–1160) composed his famous *Sentences*, which became the textbook of the medieval schools and did much to popularize Augustine's teaching, from which Peter made copious extracts. From then until the widespread dissemination of printed editions of Augustine's writings in the sixteenth century, Peter Lombard

²⁴ See Lewis Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

was the gateway through which most students learned about him, and so Augustine acquired a reputation as a systematic theologian without having been one!

Apologetical

Augustine was always concerned to win the pagan world for Christ, and in pursuit of that aim he wrote a number of evangelistic treatises designed to expound Christianity to unbelievers and to overcome their opposition to its teachings. By far the most important composition in this category is his massive twenty-two volume work *The City of God*, which is one of the most important books in world literature. It is a well-constructed defense of Christianity against its pagan detractors based on the theme that there are two “cities,” the city of God and the city of the world, which are in conflict with one another. Its length and encyclopedic comprehensiveness are such that it is useful to have a breakdown of its contents as follows:

First part (books 1–10): A refutation of paganism

Books 1–5: Paganism, useless for human society

Books 6–10: Paganism, useless for knowing God

Second part (books 11–22): A defense of Christianity

Books 11–14: How the city of God and the city of the world came into being

Books 15–18: How the two cities have developed over time

Books 19–22: What the final destiny of each of the cities will be

In the course of expounding his theme, Augustine ranged over just about every subject imaginable, and there are frequent digressions dealing with subjects that occurred to him in the course of writing and that he thought were of sufficient interest to warrant special comment. Perhaps most important for the long-term future was his rejection of millenarian prophecy, especially as an interpretation of the book of Revelation. Augustine was what would now be called “amillenarian” because he rejected the literal interpretation of the thousand-year reign of Christ that was common in his day. Instead, he believed that Revelation was an allegory of the conflict between good and evil and not a prophecy that would be worked out in human history more or less as recorded in the biblical text. Many movements have tried to revive a purely historical reading of Revelation, but many churches have adopted the Augustinian position on the matter,

and it is now the one which, broadly speaking, commands the assent of most academic theologians.

Pastoral and Monastic

As the head of a local church and leader of a monastic community within it, Augustine had to deal with a number of pastoral matters, many of which are to be found in his letters and sermons, or scattered through other writings. However, he also found time to write about specific subjects affecting the Christian life, the most important of which were connected with sexual questions. He wrote on matrimony, widowhood, and singleness, the last of these being especially relevant for monks. In addition he composed a rule for life in the monastery, which was revived in the late Middle Ages and is still in use today. Both Desiderius Erasmus and Martin Luther were monks in the Augustinian tradition, giving his writings on the subject a considerable impact on the Renaissance and Reformation of the sixteenth century.

Polemical

Some of Augustine's most important works were those written against heresies of different kinds. Like all Christians of his time, he regarded heresy as a spiritual disease to be fought in order to safeguard the health of both the individual soul and the body of Christ. As many others had done before him, he wrote a treatise against heresies in general, as well as one against the Jews. He also wrote against Arianism, which was creeping into North Africa toward the end of his life and would become the state religion under the Vandals, although it had been condemned many times in the East and was rapidly dying out in its Egyptian homeland. He also wrote against the followers of Marcion, a second-century heretic who had rejected the Old Testament; against Origen, who was accused of denying eternal punishment and believing in a form of reincarnation; and against Priscillian of Avila, who taught a form of Manichaeism. But by far the most important of his antiheretical writings were directed against three groups in particular.

The first of these was the Manichees, with whom he had associated before his conversion. In fact, a blistering treatise against Manichaeism may well have been the first thing he wrote.²⁵ In the years before 400 he returned to the same theme on several occasions, even engaging in public

²⁵ This was his *De moribus ecclesiae*, mentioned above.

debate with Fortunatus, a Manichee who visited Hippo in 392. The main themes of all these works were the same: good and evil are not competing powers; the Creator God of the Old Testament is good, one, and sovereign over all things; and evil is an absence of good and not a power in its own right. Several of the tracts were directed against particular individuals: in addition to Fortunatus, there was Faustus, who was widely regarded as the sect's chief theologian; Secundinus, who tried to persuade Augustine to return to the Manichaean fold; and Felix, who turned up in Hippo at the end of 404 and engaged in debate with the bishop. As far as Augustine was concerned, the battle lines against the Manichees were clearly drawn, and he had little difficulty in defending his position. Dualism was inherently unstable and implausible. It made much more sense to see the world as a single coherent universe under the control of one sovereign God, even if that made it difficult to explain what evil was and why it was tolerated.

The second group against which Augustine directed his polemic was the Donatist sect, which had developed out of a controversy in 311 over the honor that should be paid to the relics of martyrs. This was a sensitive issue in North Africa, where persecution had always been regarded as a badge of sanctity and running away from it had been condemned. Over time, this had led to a cult of martyrdom with its unhealthy extremes. It was believed that if the church had ceased to suffer, it was because it had compromised the gospel, and so the legalization of Christianity in the fourth century was treated as a form of apostasy. Donatism also led to the belief that the church was contaminated by the presence of sinners within it. Donatists believed that only the most rigorous discipline could protect the church's purity, but since it was they who decided what "impurity" was, they could easily target people for unworthy reasons under a cloak of sanctity.

Augustine wrote as many as twenty tracts against the Donatists, but only thirteen still survive. The loss is probably not very serious though, because (as with his anti-Manichaean polemic) the main themes repeat themselves over and over again. In the case of the Donatists, Augustine's line of argument was that the visible church is not and never can be "pure" in the absolute sense; the wheat and the tares must be allowed to grow together until the harvest.²⁶ By claiming to be perfect themselves and then judging the sins of others, the Donatists were falling into spiritual pride and self-deception. Once again, many of Augustine's works addressed

²⁶ See Matt. 13:29.

particular individuals, like the Donatist bishop Petilian, whom he saw as key to resolving the controversy. After the Council of Carthage in 411, which sought a way to reintegrate the Donatists into the mainline church, Augustine penned a passionate appeal to them that is usually regarded as his best anti-Donatist writings. (It was also his last.)²⁷

Donatism was a uniquely North African sect, a limitation that told heavily against it. If the Donatists were right, why could they find nobody elsewhere in the world who shared their views? Their localism offended against the principle of “catholicity” or universality, which was one of the marks of the true church. By no means everybody was persuaded by this logic, of course, and it is doubtful that Augustine’s anti-Donatist tracts would have been preserved at all if he had not used them for a more positive purpose, which was to teach the doctrine of the church in a way that could be applied to every situation, and not just to the peculiar circumstances of North Africa.

But by far the most serious and intractable of the heresies Augustine faced was Pelagianism. This was imported into North Africa and had a worldwide following so that the claim that it was not “catholic” could not be so easily used against it. It was also much more subtle than Donatism because it went beyond outward behavior and struck at the heart of the great questions of sin, grace, and salvation. Before Pelagianism arose, Christians had believed that Jesus saved them from the power of sin, but few had bothered to consider how great that evil power was. They instinctively believed that they had to cooperate with God in order to benefit from his mercy, without enquiring too deeply as to how that would work in practice. Pelagius probably thought that he was doing no more than stating clearly what most Christians subconsciously believed, and to a large extent he probably was. That made it much more difficult for Augustine to do battle with him and his followers, some of whom were as well educated and articulate as he was. In attacking Pelagius, Augustine was forcing his fellow Christians to think more deeply about their own sinfulness, their inability to do anything to put that right, and their total dependence on the grace of God for their salvation. What had always been known subconsciously now had to be expressed and confessed, which the church as a whole had never done before.

Augustine’s anti-Pelagian writings can be divided into three distinct types. First of all, there are the treatises directed against the heresy in gen-

²⁷ *Post collationem contra Donatistas.*

eral. Most of them were composed between 412 and 418 and it was in them that Augustine developed his understanding of original sin. One of the first things he wrote was a three-volume work addressed to Marcellinus, dealing with the just deserts of sin, forgiveness, and the baptism of infants. This was followed by a commentary on some related New Testament texts sent to him from Carthage by his friend Honoratus. There then followed another book sent to Marcellinus, outlining Augustine's understanding of divine grace.

Around 415 Augustine wrote a lengthy response to a book by Pelagius on nature, in which he defined the difference between nature and grace and affirmed the necessity of holding them both together in the scheme of salvation. There soon followed another book, dealing this time with the notion of sinless perfection, which Augustine rejected. In 418 he wrote yet another book on original sin and the grace of Christ, affirming the absolute necessity of the latter as the only way of dealing adequately with the former. He demonstrated that neither Pelagius nor his followers believed in the existence of original sin, an error that fatally compromised their understanding of the gospel. Augustine also managed to write four books on the origin of the soul, which he was provoked to do because he had been criticized for not coming down on the side either of the creationists (who believed that each soul was created independently by God) or the traducianists (who thought that souls were inherited along with the flesh). Augustine took the opportunity to explain his position, but he never did decide in favor of one of these views over the other.

The second group of his anti-Pelagian writings was directed specifically against Julian of Eclanum, who had written against him at great length. Julian had accused Augustine of denying free will, relativizing the importance of the law, downgrading baptism, slandering the saints, and opposing matrimony, as well as trying to revive Manichaeism! Augustine responded with four books of his own, followed soon afterward by two others dealing with the specific question of matrimony. These were all written in 419–420, but Julian would not be deterred, and so in 421 Augustine wrote a further six books against him, refuting his arguments point by point. These works summarize the earlier ones and are the most important to have come out of the Pelagian controversy. Some years later, Augustine took up his pen against Julian once more, but had only managed to complete six out of a projected eight books when he was overtaken by death.

The last group of his anti-Pelagian writings were the two tracts written to the monks of Hadrametum and Marseilles, who had questioned his understanding of the relationship between grace and free will. The first tract dealt specifically with that problem and the second explained how spiritual discipline could be harmonized with the efficacy of divine grace. Augustine expounded salvation in terms of human freedom, making a clear distinction between the freedom of Adam at creation, our freedom now, and the freedom of the blessed saints in heaven. It is in our present condition that grace comes to aid our free will by giving it the strength and the motivation to do what it knows is right but cannot achieve on its own. In this way, he managed to harmonize what might at first sight appear to be the contradictory forces of grace and free will, though it must be said that his solution to the problem was not to be definitive. Controversy over this would rumble on for centuries, and it is not over yet.

Letters and Sermons

Augustine's letters and sermons extended throughout his career and touched on all the above subjects and more. They are invaluable as a guide to his state of mind at particular points in his life and shed considerable light on the nature of the controversies that took up so much of his time. They also show Augustine at his pastoral best, since in both his letters and his sermons he speaks directly to the needs of his addressees. Most of his letters have been known for centuries, but new ones are still being discovered, and there is a real possibility that more will turn up in the years to come. Much the same can be said for his sermons, though the authenticity of some of them has been questioned. Many of them cannot be dated with precision, so it is difficult to use them as source material for the details of Augustine's life, but they give us a good general picture of the state of the church in Hippo during the years of his ministry there.

Augustine has left us a corpus of material that is enormous, even by modern standards, and remarkably varied. It is no surprise that his work became the foundation of almost all serious theological writing in the Middle Ages and beyond, nor that his more important works are still in print and readily available today.

Augustine's Basic Beliefs

Augustine lived at a time of great turmoil in the church, but his own beliefs were clear in his mind, and he never deviated from the path of creedal orthodoxy, even though he played little or no part in framing it. At the time of his conversion in 386, the church had already condemned the doctrine of Arius, who denied the divinity of Christ, and of the many semi-Arians who tried to find a compromise between his position and that of the great Athanasius, who insisted that the man Jesus of Nazareth was the Son of God in human flesh. There had been two universal, or “ecumenical,” church councils—one at Nicaea in 325 and another at Constantinople in 381—both of which had asserted that the Father and the Son were of the same divine substance, and Augustine fully concurred with them on that. At the same time, his own relationship to the councils and the Arian controversy was relatively distant. There are indications that he knew of the Creed of Nicaea but he probably did not use it.²⁸ Certainly, he never wrote a commentary on it as he did on the baptismal creed, which he also cited in different versions in his sermons.²⁹

In his own lifetime, trouble was brewing in the East. On one side were those who stressed the Athanasian principle that in Christ, the Word of God had become flesh by adding a human nature to his preexistent divinity. On the other side were those who objected to this by claiming that the human nature of Jesus had its own integrity and he would have been a man even if the Holy Spirit had not introduced divinity into the womb of Mary. Controversy erupted in 429 when Nestorius, recently elevated to the patriarchate of Constantinople, challenged the Athanasian position and was denounced by Cyril of Alexandria, who appealed to Rome for support. That support was forthcoming, but by the time Nestorius was condemned (at Ephesus in 431), Augustine was dead, and there is no indication that he knew anything of this dispute. His own position, which is set out in the first book of *On the Trinity*, leaned toward a moderately Athanasian stance, and it was this that Pope Leo I drew on in his efforts to resolve the Nestorian conflict at the Council of Chalcedon in 451. Because of this connection, Augustine’s

²⁸He mentioned it in *Contra Maximinum Arianum* 2.14.3, but only in passing. It should be noted that this creed was not the one that we now call the Nicene Creed, which is thought to have been composed at or shortly after the first council of Constantinople in 381. Augustine never said anything about that one.

²⁹Augustine cited the creed used at Milan in *Sermones* 212–14, and the one used at Hippo in *Sermones* 215. The form of it that he commented on was actually shorter than either of these. See *De symbolo ad catechumenos*. The text of all three can be found side by side in Allan D. Fitzgerald, ed., *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 255.

christology appears to be Chalcedonian ahead of its time, and later generations have often read him in that way, perhaps not realizing that the doctrine they have believed he was upholding was not formulated until more than twenty years after his death.

Augustine's christology was well received at Chalcedon, but it was a different matter with his doctrine of the Trinity, despite the fact that his christology was formulated within a Trinitarian context.³⁰ Augustine quickly realized that the Arian controversy was essentially about the nature of the divinity attributed to the Son and the Holy Spirit in contrast to that of the Father. There had already been considerable speculation about the Trinity in the Western church, and Augustine was happy to take over the work of his great North African predecessor Tertullian, who had done more than anyone to lay down the ground rules for talking about the doctrine. Augustine was also aware of the contributions made by the Cappadocian fathers in the Eastern church, having imbibed their ideas from Hilary of Poitiers, a Latin-speaking bishop who had visited Cappadocia during his exile in the late 350s and who had written his own book on the Trinity in order to explain their thinking.³¹

Augustine had problems with the standard formula of three persons in one divine substance and wished that better terms could be found, but he recognized the difficulty in doing this, and in the end he stuck with inherited tradition for lack of anything better. Modern commentators have sometimes interpreted his hesitation as a potential denial of Trinitarian doctrine, but that is not the case. That there were three in one and one in three was undoubted; the difficulty was in knowing what best to call them. It has also been claimed that he misunderstood the Cappadocians, but that assertion, which comes almost entirely from the Eastern church and its sympathizers, must also be treated with caution. It may be true that his Greek was not good enough to appreciate the Cappadocians' subtleties, but he read them through Hilary, who was well informed about them and did his best to convey them to a Latin-speaking public. It is also true that the Cappadocians did not have a clearly defined doctrine in the sense attributed to them by later generations; they were making it up as they went along, feeling their way toward a viable solution to the various dif-

³⁰ It was adopted by at least half the Eastern church, but the rest split into Nestorians and "Monophysites," who both rejected what they saw as its compromise formula.

³¹ The main Cappadocian fathers were Basil of Caesarea (ca. 329–379), Gregory of Nazianzus (ca. 330–390), and Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 330–ca. 395).

difficulties they encountered on the way. Augustine was doing essentially the same thing, and neither he nor they should be judged by the criteria of a later time.

What is true is that he made his own distinctive contribution to the doctrine. Augustine believed that the key to understanding the Trinity is the fact that God is love. Love is not a thing, nor is it a quality belonging to a thing. It is a relationship, which means that if God is love, there must be someone (or something) for him to love. Furthermore, if God is perfect, his love must also be perfect, which implies that what he loves must be perfect too. Following that logic, God must love himself, because he is the only being that meets the criterion of perfection. But for God to love himself, he must have a conception of himself, and that conception is the Son, who is his exact image.³² Love must also be reciprocal. If I love someone but am not loved back, that is not perfection. So the Son must love the Father with the same love by which the Father loves him. It is this love that is common to them both and that binds them together. Augustine debated for a long time as to whether this shared love could be equated with the Holy Spirit, but in the end he said that it could; the Spirit is the love that proceeds from both the Father and the Son and that unites them.

From there, Augustine went on to say that the image of God in man is an image of the Trinity. The three persons in God are like the memory, intellect, and will in the human mind—distinct but inseparable, and all equally necessary if the mind is to function properly. This “psychological” image of the Trinity is fundamental to his thought and must be understood if his teaching on other things is to be appreciated. For a man to become like God is to realize the potential that has been given to him in the divine image, a picture that determined everything he had to say about living the Christian life.

The other fundamental principle that guided Augustine was his devotion to the Bible. The Scriptures were given by God to his people as the inerrant source of all true wisdom. The man who wants to live according to God’s will must obey their teaching, and it is the duty of the church and its ministers to provide the instruction necessary to understanding what that teaching is. Augustine knew all about corrupt manuscripts and bad translations, and he offered guidance to his readers as to how to detect

³²Note that “conception” can be used both of mental and of physical reproduction, making the human analogy of Father and Son particularly appropriate in this case.

such errors and correct them. But he never wavered in his fundamental conviction that the Bible was a gift from God to the church, which was charged with the duty of recognizing the books that belonged to it and of interpreting them correctly.

Augustine put great faith in the collective wisdom of the church, which had preserved the Scriptures and their teaching. He did not claim that popes, bishops, or church councils had taken decisions about biblical authority and imposed them on everyone else, because they had not. What he meant was that all Christians everywhere recognized the divine inspiration of the text; they knew from their experience that in these books God was speaking to them. That was why he accepted the so-called Apocrypha—books that had been added to the Greek Old Testament but were not in the Hebrew original. He argued that the church had received them as God's Word and that they should be accepted for that reason, even though his contemporary Jerome, who knew Hebrew and was an unequalled biblical scholar, disagreed with him about this. In Jerome's opinion, the limits of the Old Testament had to be determined by the people of the Old Testament—the Jews. For that reason, only the Hebrew text was valid. Unfortunately, the church followed Augustine in this, and it was not until the Reformation that Jerome's more logical view resurfaced and was adopted by the Protestants. Today, almost everyone (including most Roman Catholic biblical scholars) sides with Jerome against Augustine on this point, but at least Augustine's intentions can be respected, even if we must disagree with his conclusions.

Another important aspect of his theology was the way in which he conceived of human salvation. Here Augustine really did sort out a doctrine that had never been clearly expounded before. First of all, he insisted that the sovereign goodness of God meant that everything that happens in the world is under divine control. This is the doctrine known as providence. When it is applied to the destiny of individuals, it becomes predestination. As Augustine saw it, every human being has been predestined from the beginning, either for salvation in Christ or for destruction. Those who have been set aside for salvation are the elect, or chosen ones. Their history began with Abraham and continued through the generations of his descendants, the Israelites. Israel was not an end in itself however, but a nation that had been constituted and chosen to be a witness of the greater salvation that was to come in Christ. The Son of God came to Israel and made

atonement for the sins of the people according to the law of Moses given to the Israelites after their departure from Egypt, but the accomplishment of his work meant that the nature of Israel changed in the process.

What had previously been expressed as a nation with its own religious cult now gave way to a universal gospel of salvation that extended to every tribe and people. The criterion of election was no longer circumcision but baptism into the Christian church. To be baptized was to be born again, and it was the duty of the church and its ministers to make baptism available to anyone who wanted it. Furthermore, he believed, baptism did what circumcision could not do—it washed away the guilt of original sin. It was Augustine's conviction that when Adam and Eve fell, sin entered the human race and brought death and destruction in its wake. He drew this conclusion from his reading of Romans 5:12, which (in his version) read: "Sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all had sinned *in him*."

Modern scholars know that Augustine misunderstood this verse, not because his Greek was poor but because he was relying on the translation made by an unknown man whom we call Ambrosiaster (because it was once thought that the translator was Ambrose). However, we must be careful not to reject Augustine's teaching merely because one of the verses he used to support it does not say what he thought it did. For one thing, it is hard to see why death would have spread to everyone if Adam's sin had been personal to him alone. Second, other verses, including those in the immediate context in Romans, justify Augustine's view, even if this particular one does not. Here is a good example of how Augustine understood the overall sense of Scripture even if particular words and phrases had been mishandled or mistranslated.

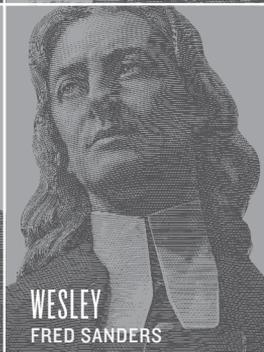
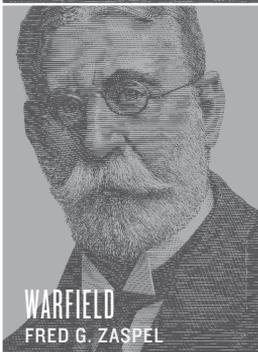
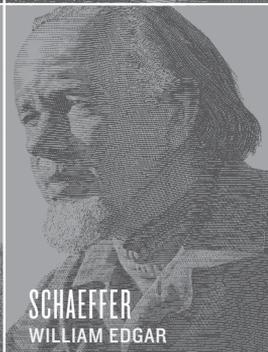
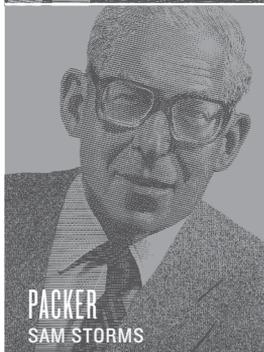
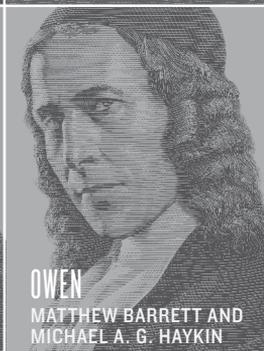
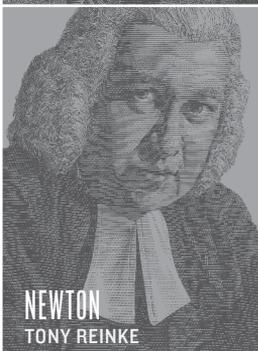
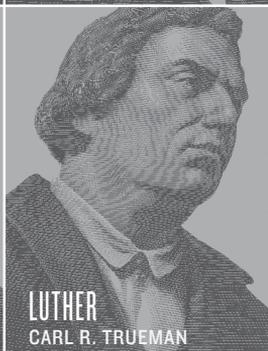
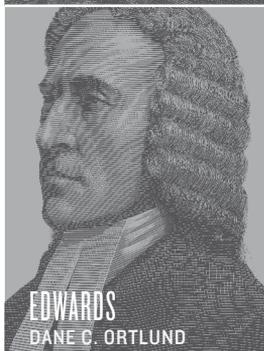
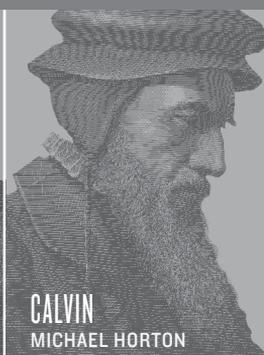
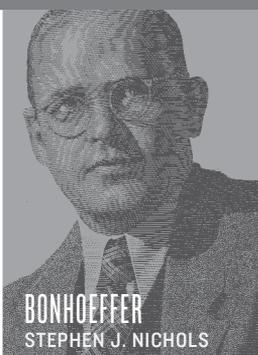
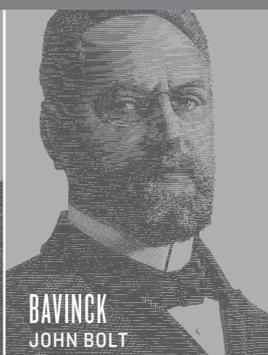
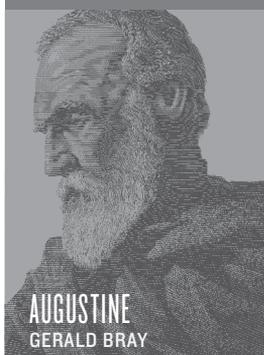
Augustine thought that the spread of sin meant that no human being can escape from the wrath of God against sinners. Contrary to what Pelagius taught, there is no residue of goodness in the human soul that is able to fight back against the power of sin. Only the grace of God can do that, so the Christian gospel is a message that the divine grace which we need has been poured out and made available to us. The Bible is not a self-help manual for our improvement to the point where we are worthy of heaven, but the proclamation of God's rescue plan, which he devised, carried out, and has now implemented in the mission of the church. The Christian life is therefore an appropriation of that grace, not a striving to achieve

something beyond our grasp. It is a message of forgiveness for our sins, not of condemnation for having failed to make the grade.

Once this is understood, the nature of our relationship to God changes beyond recognition. No longer can the church be seen as a school of moral achievement in which some pupils take all the prizes. On the contrary, it is a hospital for sick sinners, who are cured not by their own inner resources but by the healthy medicine of divine grace. What Christians need to know is not how to become better people, which is impossible, but how to receive the grace offered to us and let it shape the image of God in our hearts and minds. Only when we understand that will we understand what the Bible teaches and what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

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