

Augustine of Hippo (354-430) and the
Priority of Grace

Grace experienced

Augustine's conversion (Milan, 386), after moral waywardness and rootless religious-intellectual search. Renunciation and submission.

Prayers of mother Monnica: impact of Ambrose, bishop of Milan: providential help of Neoplatonic philosophy.

Grace realized in Scripture and pastoral practice

Augustine unwillingly made presbyter (391) and bishop (395/6) of Hippo (modern Annaba, Algeria).

Development from more optimistic-humanist-philosophical understanding of free will, evil and grace to more realistic-biblical-theological understanding.

Illustrated in his own life in Confessions (c.398): spelt out in coming to terms with Paul's Romans in Various Questions to Simplicianus, Bk.1: confirmed in Augustine's increasing pastoral awareness of human nature's frailty, perversity and stubbornness, especially in dealings with Donatist schismatics.

Grace clarified and defended in controversy

Against Pelagius and his associates and against catholic critics ('semi-Pelagians' - really semi-Augustinians), Augustine defended, with ever-increasing sharpness over twenty years (411-430), the following teachings:

- disastrous consequences of Adam's sin, because we all sinned 'in Adam'
- transmission of original sin (weakness, disorder, guilt), through the lust of sexual intercourse
- necessity of inward power of grace to 'prepare the will' to turn to God: even 'the beginning of faith' is God's gift
- grace given only to the elect, through baptism: God's gratuitous choice of the 'fixed number' of the elect, the rest being left to their just deserts; God's judgments inscrutable
- irresistibility of God's grace, and the 'gift of perseverance' to elect

Evaluation

Despite some weaknesses in biblical exegesis, Augustine vindicated the necessity of grace (the church a hospital for sinners) and its priority over human response. Pelagianism a demanding elitist creed; Augustinianism a faith for broken humanity.

Further reading:

Augustine, Confessions (many translations, e.g. in Penguin)

Augustine, Anti-Pelagian Writings, ed. B.B. Warfield (Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers)

H. Chadwick, Augustine

D. Bentley-Taylor, Augustine: Wayward Genius

G. Bonner, St. Augustine of Hippo

P. Brown, Augustine of Hippo

F. Van der Meer, Augustine the Bishop

J.B. Mozley, A Treatise on the Augustinian Doctrine of Predestination

E. TeSelle, Augustine the Theologian