

Augustine's Theology of History

This lesson is entitled “The City of God, Saint Augustine’s Theology of History.” I have used several prayers of Saint Augustine, and I have been reading some excerpts from a letter that Augustine wrote to a widow who asked him how to pray. One thing that Augustine told her was this: “We are to avoid much speaking in prayers, but not much praying. Much speaking in prayer is to do what we have to do using superfluous words. Much praying is having our hearts pulsing with prolonged and reverent fervor directed toward the one to whom we are praying. Most of the time this will consist more in sighing than in speaking, more in tears than in words. God has placed our tears in His sight, and our sighs are not hidden from Him who made all things through His Word and has no need of human words. But still we pray, using human words, even though those words must fall far short of what is in our hearts.”

Let us pray today using a prayer, again, from Saint Augustine. *“Blessed are all Your saints, O God and King, who have traveled over the tempestuous sea of this life and have made the harbor of peace and felicity. Watch over us who are still on our dangerous voyage, and remember those who lie exposed to the rough storms of trouble and temptations. Frail is our vessel, and the ocean is wide. But as in Your mercy You have set our course, so steer the vessel of our life towards the everlasting shore of peace, and bring us at lengths to the quiet haven of our heart’s desire, where You, O God, are blessed and live and reign forever. Amen.”*

There were three great events in Saint Augustine’s life. Each of those in God’s providence led to his focusing on an issue of theology. The first was his struggle with the Donatists. That had happened long before Augustine was even born, but the continuation of that struggle in North Africa took his attention to the doctrine of the church. Then his struggle with Pelagius and the Pelagians caused him to focus many years on the study of the doctrine of grace, which I covered in the previous lesson. Augustine also lived in the time of the fall of Rome. That great event in history, one of the greatest events in western history, caused him to reflect very much on the doctrine of providence and on the meaning of history.

The occasion for Augustine writing one of his greatest books, certainly one of the biggest books he wrote, *The City of God*, was the fall of Rome. Rome was sacked, conquered, and partly destroyed by Barbarian forces in 410. That created shock all over the empire. Rome was the “Eternal City” and was going to be there forever as far as anyone at the time knew. But then it fell. Even over in Bethlehem in his monastery, Jerome wrote, “The whole world perished in one city.” It is difficult for us to imagine the shock that came to the Roman world as Rome began to totter and then fall. We always say that Rome was not built in a day, and neither did it fall in a day. There is not one date that we can assign to the fall of Rome. The year 410 is an important step along the way to the collapse of the Roman Empire, because the city was conquered by Alaric and his western Gothic army on that occasion. But there were many stages in the fall of Rome. The last western emperor died in 476, so we can think of Rome as falling through the fifth century, and particularly between 410 and 476.

Saint Augustine died between those two dates, in 430. When Augustine died, while living in North Africa, the Barbarians were moving down into North Africa. They had moved through Spain, across Gibraltar, and then began to siege the cities of North Africa. Soldiers of the Barbarians were nearby even as Augustine lay dying. He realized the trouble and the problems. At that moment the Roman general who was head of the Roman armies in North Africa, a man named Boniface, thought it was a good time for him to retire. He went into a monastery to seek the salvation of his soul. Augustine heard of that and said, “Not now.” He said it was not a good time for a general to become a monk. He said

they needed all the soldiers they could get and all the leadership they had in order to withstand the onslaught of the Barbarians.

As Augustine lived his latter years in that very changing world and everything seemed to be in tumult, he began to write his big book in order to understand what was happening and to explain it to people, both pagans and Christians. Augustine spent 12 years working on *The City of God*. The Scripture text that was in Augustine's mind as he titled his book was from Psalm 46. Psalm 46:4 says, "There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God." Depending on the translated edition you find, the book is over 1000 pages. I had been lecturing on Augustine and *The City of God* for many years before I finished the book. I would read parts of it and then lecture about it. I finally decided it was not good for me to lecture about a book I had not really read, at least not all the way through. Some years ago I made a definite plan to read the whole book, and I succeeded. Now I can say I have read it. As I try to describe it to you in this lecture, I can do so with a little more confidence than I could earlier.

When Augustine gets to the end of the book, he writes, "Now as I think I have discharged my debt with the completion by God's help of this huge work, it may be too much for some and too little for others. Of both these groups I ask forgiveness. But of those for whom it is enough, I make this request, that they do not thank me, but join with me in rendering thanks to God. Amen. Amen." As I talk about *The City of God* today, I want to join in with Augustine in rendering thanks to God, because that is what he asks us to do in our response to his book.

It is a great book, not only in size, but also in importance. I could spend much time, although I am not going to do so, reading statements that people have made about *The City of God*. I will quote George Grant, a columnist from "World" magazine, who closed his review of the book by saying, "This rather ancient tome is the most up-to-date book I have read in recent memory." So we are dealing not only a big book, and an important book, but also an up-to-date book.

I will try to describe for you what is in the book. Augustine lived at a momentous point in history. Things were changing quickly. Augustine knew of several ways people had of trying to make sense of all of the changes that were part of the impending collapse of Rome. There were pagans still around. Peter Brown has called the time a "post-pagan period." We now live in a post-Christian period, but that was a post-pagan period. But that did not mean that there were no pagans. During Augustine's lifetime there was a neo-paganism revival of paganism. Some people wanted to go back to the older gods and goddesses of Greece and Rome. As the pagans viewed Rome and its impending collapse, they blamed Christianity. After all, Rome in its heyday, when it was strong, had been devoted to the pagan deities. Having forsaken those deities and turning to Christianity, the pagans said that it was the vengeance of the gods of Rome, who felt slighted and left out, which was creating the turmoil in the empire. That was one view. There were Christians who took the opposite view. They thought that Rome was still too pagan, too wicked, and too worldly. In their view, since Rome still tolerated paganism, it was the vengeance of the Christian God, who was punishing the halfway-Christian city and empire, which was the explanation of the turmoil. In between, there were many people who were just confused and in despair over what was happening.

Augustine in *The City of God* set out to answer some of those questions. He wanted to counter the criticisms of the pagans, who said that Rome was strong and blessed in its pagan day and then became weak and demoralized in its Christian phase. At the same time, Augustine attempted to discredit the "Rome-theology" of people like Eusebius of Caesarea, who had identified the Roman Empire, after Constantine had converted to Christianity, with the kingdom of God. Those two ideas were held very close together in his official theology. Popular expressions of that idea said that Rome was God's city

and He would take care of it. But when He did not, apparently, that official theology was gravely shaken. If it was God's city and it was falling to Barbarians, where was God in it all? So Augustine set out to defend what he calls "the glorious city of God" against those "who prefer their own gods to the Founder of that city."

Augustine organized his book in a number of different books within the whole book. The first 10 books can be described as apologetic and polemic. He replies to the polytheist who wanted to return to the worship of many gods. He pointed out in great detail that those pagan gods did not protect Rome. Rome had many crises, catastrophes, and disasters during its pagan period. Not only that, but the pagan gods debased the Romans. He described the lifestyle of pagan Rome, with its excesses, sins, lusts, and evil. Henry Chadwick, in his book on Augustine, said that in that section of *The City of God* there is "exhausting erudition on the most trivial aspects of pagan culture." In chapter after chapter, and page after page, Augustine explained exactly what the pagans believed, how they lived, and what they thought. One of the greatest sources for an understanding of Roman paganism comes from the pages of *The City of God*. He finishes the section by saying that, not only were the pagan gods ineffective, but those gods did not even exist. So paganism was equal to atheism. At one time pagans criticized Christians for being atheist. Now Augustine criticized the pagans for being atheist because they worshiped figments of their own imagination.

There was another religious movement. It was one that Augustine was much enamored with for a time, neo-Platonic philosophy. The neo-Platonists were able to move away from the concrete ties to paganism of Greece and Rome to a spiritualized pantheon, with virtues and spiritual ideals as being that which we look to for guidance in our life rather than actual gods and goddesses. For a number of pages Augustine said such a philosophy was insufficient for eternal life. His main criticism of neo-Platonic philosophy was that, though it saw the goal much more clearly than other religious constructs, it did not have a way of getting to the goal, because it did not know anything about the incarnation.

There is another theme that is present in the first 10 books. Many Christians, following the Eusebian way of looking at things, believed that since Rome was Christian, God would protect it and bless it. Augustine takes a great deal of pain to disabuse people of that notion. Nowhere does God promise to safeguard the possessions and the peace, or even the lives, of Christians. One of the most impressive repudiations of a "health and wealth" gospel is found in *The City of God*, and it is very relevant to our modern world. Augustine breaks the link between providence and prosperity. Those two ideas cannot be held together, as many people did back then and some people do today. The thinking is that when things go well, God is with us, and when things go badly, God has abandoned us. Augustine says repeatedly that such thinking is not right, not biblical.

The next large section of *The City of God* begins in book 11. It is the theological section in which Augustine sets forth his interpretation of history. He does so by presenting a huge account of the flow of salvation history from the creation of the world to the final resurrection. In the process of doing that, Augustine deals with much history. History is linear. There is a beginning. There are certain points along the way. And there is an end to human history. He repudiates the Greek cyclical idea of history, that history simply repeats itself and is without a true beginning or end. For Augustine, history is also very real. Much of the book is history. Augustine felt it is very important for us to know history, both biblical and secular history, in order to understand something of how to interpret history.

As he begins to interpret history, or present his theology or philosophy of history, he sets it up by saying there are two cities in the flow of history, both in the Bible and outside of the Bible. He begins by writing about the origin of those two cities. One is the city of God, and the other is the city of this world,

or an earthly city. To understand him, however, we must not think of a city, like Rome or some other actual city. Augustine is using the term “city” in a figurative, spiritual sense, which refers to two allegiances, or two loves—the love of God and the love of self. The two loves, or two allegiances, are what produce the two cities. Augustine goes all the way back to the fall of the angels to show how, even before the creation of Adam and Eve, there are two cities. There are the angels who persist in their love for God. And there are those angels who fall away from God because of their self-love. Those same two cities find earthly expression in Cain and Abel—love for God and love for self. Then throughout the flow of history we see that same division between the city of God and the city of this world.

As Augustine was writing *The City of God*, he was also battling the Pelagians. He was very aware that God created the two cities by His own predestinating grace. He does not stress that theme in this work. It is not because it is unimportant to Augustine, but in *The City of God* he is stressing the fact that to believe in grace and to believe in election does not mean that we should not urge people to faith and love for God.

The members of the city of God maintain their identity, but not by withdrawing from the world and living some kind of separate life. The city of God exists wherever there are people who love God. And those people are everywhere in the world as resident aliens. In the review of *The City of God* by George Grant, he writes, “According to Augustine, cultures are not reflections of a people’s race, ethnicity, folklore, politics, language, or heritage. Rather, cultures are an outworking of a people’s creed. In other words, culture is the temporal manifestation of a people’s faith. If a culture begins to change, it is not because of fads, fashions, or the passing of time. It is because of a shift in worldview, a change in faith.” As Augustine viewed it, what produces the division in the world, what creates culture wars, is a commitment to a faith, to a belief. Augustine was fighting a culture war in his time, with the culture of the Christian faith being opposed by the culture of this world.

As the two cities began and developed and progressed through human history, they found partial, visible expression in the empire and in the church. But at that point, Augustine’s thought becomes very complex. It is not always easy to grasp what Augustine is saying, but I will attempt to give you some ways of thinking about it. The first issue he deals with is how we should view the state. First of all, Augustine says, Rome is not the source of all evil. We should not view the state as the totality of evil, as the Donatists were attempting to do. Rome was always evil to the Donatists, because Rome was supporting the Catholic Church against the Donatist church. That was a “Christ against culture” idea that the Donatists practiced. Their concept was that the state was satanic. Evil would come from the state that would persecute and oppress the true church. Augustine makes it clear that we should not view the state as the source of all evil.

Yet neither should we view the state as Eusebius of Caesarea did as God’s chosen instrument of salvation, or the source of all good. If the Donatists had a satanic view of the state, Eusebius had a messianic view of the state. That led to a “Christ of culture” approach that Augustine also rejects. For Augustine, the state is the creation and instrument of God. So it could be and had been the source of much good. Augustine recognized that Christianity had greatly profited from the Roman state. The conversion of Constantine and all that went with it led to great blessing and profit for the church. Because of sin, however, the state can degenerate, and often does degenerate, into a city of this world. It can be a city that aims at dominion and holds nations in enslavement.

Augustine made some very clear criticisms of Rome, such as the lack of justice. He wrote, “If justice be absent, what is a kingdom but a crowd of gangsters.” The other major criticism that Augustine leveled against Rome, and which is always a potential criticism of any state, was a lack of compassion.

Augustine quoted the writer, Sallust, saying Roman society was characterized by “private affluence and public squalor.” The rich were getting richer and the poor were getting poorer. Augustine saw that as something seriously wrong with the state. Augustine thus offers a nuanced view of the state. It is neither altogether good, nor altogether bad. It could be a good instrument that God uses. And God does even use a wicked state as His instrument. But the state, because of the fallen sinful people who are in it, can easily become a crowd of gangsters.

For Augustine, the church is the primary manifestation of the city of God on earth. It is not the only manifestation. The Christian family is also a manifestation of the city of God on earth. And every individual Christian is a manifestation of the city of God on earth. But Augustine could never conceive of Christianity as being individual Christians. He wrote that one cannot have God as Father without having the church as mother. He viewed the church as the people of God on earth. It is important to notice this point, because Augustine does not completely equate the visible church with the city of God. In later medieval theology that equation would be made. Roman Catholic theology would view the church as the city of God. Augustine did not view the city of God as being identical with the church. He saw that the city of this world is still at work within the church. So the church has some mingling of good and evil, as the state does.

There are visible and invisible aspects to the church. Augustine was one of the first people in church history to use those ideas. There is the visible church, the outward church, the church we see. And there is the invisible Church, known only to God, the church of the elect. Many times in *The City of God* Augustine makes the point that some people who are united with the church, in participation in the sacraments, are not true members of the church. He tells us that out in the world there are some predestined friends among our most open enemies. Augustine said that we ought to remember that when we look out on the world and see our enemies, some of them are our friends. They do not know it yet. And we do not know it yet. But some day they will be with us in the church and with us forever in heaven. So it is as important how we treat people in the world as how we treat people in the church. Augustine thought of the world in this way: “There are wolves within, and there are sheep without.”

There is another point that Augustine makes about the visible church. He writes about the diversity of the visible church. He makes a remarkable statement in *The City of God*. “This heavenly city, then, while it sojourns on earth, calls citizens out of all nations and gathers together a society of pilgrims of all languages. It is so far from rescinding and abolishing these diversities that it even preserves and adopts them, so long only as no hindrance to the worship of the one supreme and true God is thus introduced.” If we had taken hold of that sentence in the history of the church, particularly in the missionary history of the church, we would have saved ourselves from many problems and embarrassments as missionaries tried to impose foreign culture on newly evangelized peoples and suppress the culture of those people. Augustine, on the other hand, celebrates the diversity that he finds in the church. It is “a society of pilgrims of all languages,” preserving and even adopting those diversities.

As Augustine looks at the two cities, which began in the two loves and find partial but imperfect visible manifestations in the state and in the church, he then comes to the outcome and goals of the two cities. Christ is ruling now, in the world, but He is ruling in a special sense in the church. Augustine moved into what we sometimes call a “realized” eschatology, abandoning the *chiliasm* or “millennialism” of some of the church fathers prior to him, which said that Christ would return to set up His kingdom on this earth and rule for 1000 years. Augustine, in *The City of God*, argues against that 1000 year reign of Christ to come. While Christ is reigning over everything now, Augustine was thinking of His reign in a special sense. The special reign of Christ, which might be called His “millennial” reign, is not taking place in the state, or even in the Christian society, but in the church. He writes, “We are like pilgrims on

the way to our fatherland. Christ is our king, and there are two goods that are set before us, the good which is to be used and the good which is to be enjoyed.” That is a rather famous distinction that Augustine made. It may perplex us at first. That which is to be used is always a lesser good, such as creation, other people, or the blessings of this life. Augustine is reserving only one thing as that which is to be enjoyed, and that is God. We use every legitimate thing that God gives us, and so we can appreciate the beauty and usefulness of all created things. But those are always lesser things, to be used for our spiritual advancement and for the blessing of the world. They are not things to be enjoyed for their own sake. In Augustine’s way of thinking, we enjoy God only. Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever. Augustine did not write that, of course, but he would have said “Amen” to that point from the Westminster Shorter Catechism.

As we move through this world the two cities are interwoven and intermixed, and they await separation at the last judgment. Augustine warns us against trying to do that ahead of time. We cannot separate the wheat and the tares, as the Donatists believed they could. The Donatists believed they could have a pure church. They could get all of the worldly people out of it and have a pure church. Augustine said that they would not attain a pure church. They would perhaps have a church of sinners who are sinning different sins. Most of us are sinning, but in some cases the same sins. The fiction of a pure church that the Donatists set up was indeed that—only a fiction. We await the judgment, and then the perfect city of God in heaven will come forth.

Before I comment briefly on some other aspects of the book, let me close this section with a sentence from a modern historian. “Augustine does achieve a vision, which carried the church through the next great crisis of its history. Having won the Roman Empire, it had to find a way of surviving its collapse. He directed people to a city which could not be shaken when Rome fell. That is the heart and soul of this great book.”

I want to say something else about *The City of God*. The translator of my particular edition has written, “*The City of God* is as notable for its delightful digressions as for its central theme.” I have provided a “central theme” approach. But if you read the book, you might spend 100 pages without reading anything about the city of God or the city of this world. Augustine often moves on to something else. One never quite knows what is coming next. It has the fascination of a book about everything. Let me give you a few examples to whet your appetite.

One example that may amaze you is Augustine’s allegorical use of numbers, which can get wild. Augustine would take a biblical number and begin to expound it—dividing it, adding it, and coming up with all kinds of lists and speculations as to the significance of that number. Whenever Augustine saw a number he got excited, and he would do his best to explain the meaning of that number, which was almost never what it really meant. You can read in book 15, section 20, about Augustine’s view of the inner meaning of the 153 fishes in the last chapter of Saint John. You will not be disappointed in his imagination.

You can read book 19, section 7, for a moving statement about a man and his dog. Augustine describes what a dog means to a man. He says that sometimes it is better to have a dog with you than another person. It is a tribute to dogs.

Augustine speculates on the immortal flesh of a peacock. He is dealing with the question of how a human can go to hell and burn forever without being consumed. His answer is to look to the peacock, which after it dies, its flesh never disintegrates. That is not true, of course, but that was Augustine’s view. Someone had told him that, and he thought it was right. He not only thought it was right, but he

did an experiment on a peacock. In his experiment, he did not notice the flesh of the dead peacock disintegrating. It got tough and hard, but it was still there after a long time.

Augustine includes reflections on childhood. He said childhood is the worst time in life. He said if anybody had a choice of a time in life to go back and pick one's life again, nobody would start over as a child. After all, children have to go to school, and teachers give them exams and discipline them. Augustine said that all children are born into the world crying because they know what is coming. According to Augustine, the only person who was not born crying was Zoroaster. Supposedly, he smiled when he came into the world, but he turned out to be a heretic.

Augustine also said that the age of our resurrection bodies will be 30 years old, for all of us. That is because that was the age of Christ at His resurrection. And beside that, after 30, a man begins to go downhill. That particular point was discouraging to me, because I have long since gone downhill.

Augustine also describes some of the wonders of nature. Some of the most beautiful and poetic passages of *The City of God* have to do with Augustine reveling in nature. He looks at the clouds. He looks at the sea. Augustine loved the sea. He could see the Mediterranean from his study. He was fascinated by the different tones of the colors of the sea. He particularly liked to watch the sea when there was a storm at sea, because he was not out there. He was safe in his study. And he rejoiced in the beauty of God's creation. He said, "With such wonderful consolations in this world to all of us of the city of God and the city of this world, what will the rewards of the blessed be?" If this world is so full of gifts like the beauty of nature, what will heaven be like? "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of our God will stand forever" (Isaiah 40:8).