

The Good Life

Augustine saw more than health and wealth in the Christianity he claimed 1,600 years ago.

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Among the most memorable statements ever uttered is Saint Augustine's prayer, "You made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it finds rest in you." And, outside of the Bible, perhaps the most famous conversion story in all of Christendom is of the man who penned that prayer.

The radiant event of Augustine's conversion occurred in the late summer of A.D. 386. It was followed by a period of solitude and inner spiritual training that climaxed at his baptism on Easter Sunday, A.D. 387. As we close this sixteen-hundredth anniversary year of Augustine's initiation into Christianity, the many insights we can gain from his conversion journey are exceedingly relevant to the contemporary scene.

An arduous pilgrimage

The story of Augustine's conversion (told in his *Confessions*) is well known. After years of struggle with lust and skepticism about the faith, he sat one day musing in a Milan garden. There he heard a child say, "Tolle lege"—take and read. He then "snatched up" the Letter to the Romans and read until his "heart was filled with a light of confidence and all the shadows of [his] doubt were swept away." It was a great moment, but to understand Augustine's conversion rightly, we must first realize it did not happen in a vacuum. There was a very long, intricate, and often arduous path that led up to it. And we, today, in our preoccupation with the crisis of conversion, often forget the importance of the pilgrimage that precedes and follows conversion.

Crucial to Augustine's seeking after God was the yearning aroused in him early on by Cicero and others, to love wisdom and seek after truth. A brilliant mind himself, Augustine, at the age of 19, discovered Cicero's *Hortensius*. "That book inflamed me with the love of wisdom. . . . I was not encouraged by this work of Cicero's to join this or that sect;

instead I was urged on and inflamed with a passionate zeal to love and seek and obtain and embrace and hold fast wisdom itself, whatever it might be." And so, at the very time that he was "sinking down to the depths" of the "lower beauties" of sexual promiscuity, he continued to be drawn intellectually to the higher beauties of virtue and justice.

Now, Cicero was not a Christian—he did not have the full revelation of God in the face of Jesus Christ—but his writings did serve as vital pre-evangelism. As a teenager, Augustine had tried to read the Bible and found it too crude for his literary tastes; but he could read Cicero. He drew Augustine to seek after those things that are true and honorable and just (Phil. 4:8).

We must not despise this process, either for Augustine or ourselves. All truth is indeed God's truth, and the fact that certain thinkers or writers lack a grasp of the whole truth does not mean they are unable to lead us forward in our search after God. On the contrary, many folk are helped immensely by encountering the great minds. In fact, in this "post-Christian era," the chairs of philosophy in the universities are strategic places where we can make an impact by introducing eager minds to Plato's *Dialogues* and Aristotle's *Poetics* and much more, so they can be challenged to seek the good, the true, the beautiful.

Clear thinking

Augustine's journey to conversion involved an intellectual pilgrimage that is especially relevant to us who are immersed in a pluralistic society. The raging intellectual fad of that day was Manichaeism, a philosophy that postulated an absolute dualism of good and evil (a viewpoint that, incidentally, is quite popular today). Augustine was enthralled with Manichaeism for some time, but eventually he began to see

through its obvious intellectual weaknesses.

For a time, Augustine was attracted to "the Academics," a group that embraced agnosticism, and that he deemed as "wiser than the rest because they held that everything should be considered doubtful." He knew that honest doubt was far superior to foolish belief. Indeed, it is impossible to imagine Augustine entering into mature faith without this period of genuine skepticism.

The great intellectual hurdle Augustine had to overcome was the problem of evil. How could a good God allow a universe filled with evil, with pain, with suffering? It is the question that all of us ask whenever we go through the wringers of life. Augustine began finding an answer to that question when he discovered the writings of the Neo-Platonists. Basically, they viewed evil as the absence of good, which was a crucial step forward for Augustine. He later witnessed, "I . . . found that whatever I had read in the Platonists was said in Paul's writings." Intellectually, the Neo-Platonists threw open the window for Augustine onto the Bible, so that he could listen to its claims with a docile heart.

How necessary it is for us today to understand this process. Many seekers—some of them our own children—are tantalized by the various philosophical fads of our day: existentialism, phenomenology, mysticism, or agnosticism. This is an intellectual pilgrimage that many *must* travel. And we should not hide people from this process. Nor should we despair for those who are in this process, for God has not left himself without a witness, even in the most secular of surroundings. Augustine saw through the shoddy thinking of his day and was eventually led to Christ. And in our day, the same experience can be true for us and for those we love.

Augustine's intellectual trek also underscores the necessity of rejecting the

false when it is truly found wanting. There is in our day an intellectual fad that tries to accept all beliefs, blending everything into a melting pot of jumbled thinking. Augustine knew what we must relearn today, namely, that something cannot both be and not be at the same time. Once he embraced the claims of Christ as true, he was obliged to reject Manichaeism—or any other ism—at every point at which it came in conflict with Christ's teaching.

Right affections

Intellectual giant though he was, Augustine's conversion involved far more than an intellectual pilgrimage. In fact, one of his most celebrated statements reads, "Do not seek to understand in order to believe, but believe that you may understand." And, in the final analysis, the key that unlocked the door of faith for him was not intellectual persuasion, but the promise of the power to live as he knew he should.

His high ideals of virtue and justice were constantly contradicted by moral ineptitude. He was trapped, as he put it, in "the swirling mists of lust" that thrust him into "the whirlpools of vice."

Augustine's sexual escapades are well known, of course; but, even more profoundly, he understood how the seductive character of sin can taint all the affections. As a child he stole some pears, and his prolonged musings on that seemingly trivial event reveal his penetrating understanding of how evil works its way into the very warp and woof of all our motives.

As an adult he went into the profession of rhetoric, and in so doing he embraced the accepted canons of academia: pride, career advancement, education for its own sake, and more. He writes, "I panted after honours . . . and you [God] laughed at me." He had lusted after power, and it

corrupted his moral sensibilities. He turned rhetoric into a "talking-shop," where he taught students how to toy with truth and pervert justice. Words became propaganda to be maneuvered.

All of this threw him into an intolerable moral contradiction. Here he was "an ardent searcher for the blessed life" consumed with "a burning zeal for truth and wisdom," and at the same time he was enslaved to lust and power and pride. "I was sick and in torture," he confesses.

Only Christ offered the power to break the bonds of moral failure. No one had offered that kind of power; not the Manichaeans, not the academics, not even the Neo-Platonists who had been so helpful to him. Only Christ gave the ability to live the virtuous life he longed for so ardently.

Now, there is much we can learn from Augustine's understanding that conversion meant moral transformation. First, we cannot allow the valid and important emphasis upon salvation by

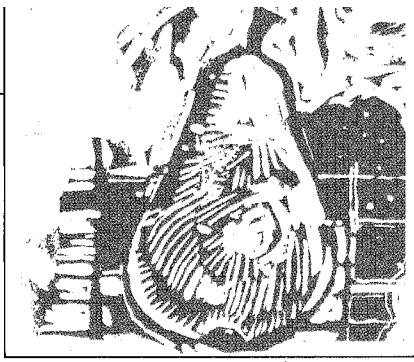


faith alone to obscure the fact that love and good works are our rightful inheritance as followers of Christ. Any gospel that fails to lead us into that experience by which our lives are increasingly taken over by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness,

and self-control is a half-gospel (Gal. 5:23). Any gospel that so focuses upon a future heaven that it leaves people firmly rooted in harshness, bitterness, and despair is a half-gospel.

Also, in pursuing moral rectitude, Augustine believed that he was pursu-

ing the good life, the blessed life, the happy life. He speaks of this often in the *Confessions* and defines the happy life as "joy in truth." He saw clearly that the good life was the virtuous life or, in biblical language, the holy life. And he came to realize that Christ alone could



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give him this blessed life.

Today the church also announces that "the good life" is found in Christ, but we have so completely reinterpreted the meaning of that classical phrase that for many people, the good life means little more than personal peace and prosperity. As a result, we have readjusted the gospel message so that it offers health and wealth rather than power over greed and pride.

For Augustine, the good life meant a life permeated throughout by love, the power to do the right and to withstand the forces of evil, the faith to see everything in the light of God's governance for good, and the strength to bear hardship, suffering, and death. For many of us in the church today, the good life means protection from all adversity, the power to be number one, the faith to realize our wildest dreams, and the peace to overcome all our neuroses. Augustine points us to a more excellent way.

Faithful witnesses

Anyone who studies Augustine's conversion is constantly bumping into people who touched him profoundly and pointed him toward Christ. His mother, Monica, is certainly a celebrated example of this. The death of a young friend also moved Augustine toward faith. But perhaps the most crucial influence was Ambrose, the bishop of Milan.

Augustine was first attracted to the famous preacher, not out of any spiritual concern, but simply out of a professional interest to observe his skills in rhetoric. Augustine was impressed: "I was delighted with the sweetness of his discourse." But ultimately he was drawn into the content of Ambrose's discourse. Here was someone who not only could speak well but who also had something to say. Although Augustine was yet un-

willing to make the final plunge into faith, he had met his match: "Ambrose, with the utmost soundness, taught salvation. But salvation is far from sinners such as I was at the time. Yet, though I did not know it, I was drawing gradually nearer."

How important were these human influences upon Augustine? Immensely important. There is nothing like a genuine disciple to lead another person into discipleship. The apostle Paul said, "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1). There is no other way to make disciples.

In our evangelistic efforts, we try every other way but the imitation of Christ. We give people our prepackaged plans of salvation. We preach at them from the safe confines of the television studio, where they see only what we want them to see. We devise elaborate plans for church growth and evangelistic penetration. We promote workshops on every conceivable subject. We organize basketball teams and volleyball teams and softball teams ad nauseam.

And all of this may indeed produce many "decisions," but seldom does it produce imitators of Christ. No, if we want converts who are genuine disciples, we must say very simply, "If you want to know what it means to be a believer, do what I do and say what I say—imitate me because I imitate Christ." Now, I know that we all immediately think, "What pride! What arrogance!" But if we would try it sometime, we would see just how proud it makes us. Indeed, one of the best ways to receive a good dose of humility is to say to people, "Live as I live," and then observe our life in them.

In point of fact, of course, people *do* imitate us, and leadership models that are anemic, worldly, and ununctionless are one reason the church is so inept

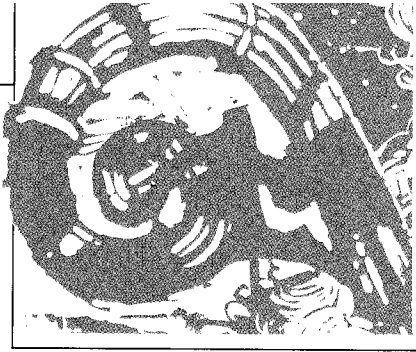
today. Augustine had models that called him to a life of holiness and discipleship before, during, and following his conversion to Christ.

True discipleship

As a result, Augustine did not believe, as is so common today, that one could be a convert to Christ without being a disciple of Christ. For him, conversion and discipleship were two sides to the same door—both were necessary for one to pass through the doorway. He knew that "receiving Christ" required a radical reordering of his life. He had counted the cost and understood that conversion meant a lifestyle without his mistress and a profession other than rhetoric, which he believed taught "the arts of deception."

Even more, he knew that turning to Christ meant turning from the arrogance and intellectual pride that had driven him so fiercely. This was the hardest decision of all and one reason why he struggled so mightily with the issue of conversion. For Augustine, conversion was not assenting easily to a few propositions; it was restructuring his whole life. The overwhelming belief of the church in the Western world today—that it is possible to become and even remain a Christian without any sign of progress in discipleship—did not even occur to him. He not only understood the grace of Christ to be "costly grace," he was unaware of any other kind of grace.

This speaks volumes to us today. When we bring people to the point of "decision" without bringing them into discipleship, we do them a great disservice. A disciple is someone who comes under the teaching and example of another, and "conversion" without discipleship provides no rationale or motive for moving forward in a life of Christ-



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likeness. In what we have come to call "The Great Commission," Jesus told us (1) to "make disciples" and (2) to teach them to observe all that he commanded us (Matt. 28:19-20). For the most part today our converts are not disciples, and, as a result, we are unable to teach them to live like Christ. From Augustine we must learn once again that a discipleless conversion is no conversion at all.

Continued growth

Various contemporary writers have suggested that Augustine would have done better to end his *Confessions* at that climactic moment in the garden. Some modern translators even eliminate the final three chapters, believing that they are anticlimactic. After all, what more can be said—what more needs to be said—after meeting the living Christ in such a dramatic conversion experience? Much, in every way, according to Augustine.

We moderns see conversion as a conclusion; Augustine saw it as a prelude. We see it as an ending; Augustine saw it as a beginning.

The apostle Peter said, "Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18). Our problem today is that we try to replace growth with birth. People in our churches are wonderfully and gloriously born again, but then, because we have no theology of growth, they flounder. This results in trying to get born-again people born again and again and again.

Augustine knew that conversion meant a lifelong discipleship, through which he was to move from faith to virtue to knowledge to self-control to steadfastness to godliness to brotherly affection to love (2 Pet. 1:5-7). He did not know where the path of discipleship would lead, but he did know that the

journey meant a lifelong process of growth and development. That is why he wrote a huge three-chapter discourse on the function of memory—to look back over and understand the development of one's life, and so develop Christian wholeness and integrity. That is why he could pray, "O Lord, the house of my soul is narrow; enlarge it, that you may enter in." That is why some of the most moving spiritual experiences in the *Confessions* occur after that day in the garden in Milan.

One of those experiences is too marvelous to pass over. Augustine was with his mother, Monica, at the city of Ostia on the Tiber river. They were leaning out a window looking at a beautifully manicured garden and discussing the goodness of life in the kingdom of God.

Augustine writes, "With the mouth of our heart we panted for the heavenly streams of your fountain, the fountain of life." But as they were talking words failed them and they were raised "higher and step by step passed over all material things, even the heaven itself from which sun and moon and stars shine down upon the earth. And still we went upward, meditating and speaking and looking with wonder at your works, and we came to our own souls, and we went beyond our souls to reach that region of never-failing plenty where *Thou feedest Israel* forever with the food of truth and where life is that Wisdom by whom all these things are made, both what is past and what is to come."

After describing this unusual experience of spiritual ecstasy, containing echoes of Saint Paul's experience of being caught up into the third heaven, Augustine notes, "We sighed and left captured there the firstfruits of our spirits and made our way back to the sound of our voices, where a word has both beginning and end."

Lessons to be learned

This, of course, is only a sampling of the many wonderful experiences God gave to the man who became the great bishop of Hippo and who has profoundly influenced the church for centuries, even to our own day.

And what do we learn from Augustine's story? We learn that our lives should be changed, can be changed, are being changed by God's grace into Christ's great likeness. We learn that others can lead us in the Way if our spirits are teachable. We learn that conversion and discipleship are like a lock and key or a bow and arrow; they are meant to function together. We learn that conversion, far from being the end of the journey, only sets us on the journey that goes from trial to trial, faith to faith, glory to glory.

And so we celebrate this sixteen-hundredth anniversary of Augustine's conversion with gratitude, learning from it lessons of life and faith.

And perhaps the lesson above all lessons to be learned is this: No matter how eagerly we seek after God, we always find that God is first seeking us. "Late have I loved you, O Beauty so ancient and so new; late have I loved you! . . . You called me and cried to me and broke upon my deafness; you sent forth your beams and shone upon me and chased away my blindness; you breathed your fragrance upon me, and I drew in my breath and now I pant for you; I tasted you, and now I hunger and thirst for you; you touched me, and I burn for your peace." □

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