

CHURCH HISTORY

The Scientific Theologians (A.D. 325-460)

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Early Church History, part 15

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. Between the Councils of Nicea and Chalcedon, several of the most able fathers of the Christian church did their greatest work. They endeavored to study the Scriptures along more scientific lines in order to develop their theological meaning. Thus, they were called “scientific theologians.” This was the golden age of theology in the early church.
- B. These scientific theologians also lived in the waning days of the Roman Empire, for the Empire fell in A.D. 476 to the barbarian hordes from the north.

II. THE EASTERN FATHERS

- A. *School of Antioch:* During this time, there sprang up in Antioch a most amazing school to train men in the Bible. The Antiochene School was in direct opposition to the Alexandrian School (allegorical interpretation), and it stressed the grammatico-historical study of the Scriptures in order to discover the meaning that the sacred writer had for those to whom he was writing. This school eventually passed out of existence because the spirit of the age was against literal interpretation.
- B. *John Chrysostom:* Chrysostom was born about A.D. 345 into a wealthy aristocratic family of Antioch. Planning to be a lawyer, he studied the Greek classics and rhetoric, and became an outstanding public speaker. For a time he did practice law, but he was baptized in A.D. 368 and immediately became a monk. He practiced an ascetic life until A.D. 380, living in a cave near Antioch. Ill health brought his monastic life to an end. He was ordained in A.D. 386 and began to preach. He became the outstanding preacher of his day, and was called “golden mouth.” In A.D. 398, he was made patriarch of Constantinople, which position he held until Empress Euzoia finally banished him in A.D. 404 because he had denounced her for her extravagant dress and for placing a silver statue of herself near St. Sophia where he preached. He

died in exile in A.D. 407. Chrysostom was and is still hailed as the greatest pulpit orator the eastern church has ever had.

- C. *Theodore (A.D. 350-428)*: Theodore of Mopsuestia was born into a wealthy family and was a very educated man. He was a product of the Antiochene School and became famous for his grammatico-historical interpretation of the Bible. He is called the “prince of ancient exegetes.” He was ordained a presbyter in Antioch in A.D. 383, and became the bishop of Mopsuestia in Cilicia about A.D. 392.
- D. *Eusebius (A.D. 260-340)*: He was the first real Christian historian, and his most famous work is the *Ecclesiastical History*.

III. THE LATIN FATHERS

- A. *Ambrose (A.D. 340-397)*: Ambrose was born of high ranking officials in the Roman government in the western part of Germany. He was well educated, but certainly not a Christian and with no Christian background. He displayed great administrative abilities, and when he was very young he was appointed governor of a large part of northern Italy. He took up residence in Milan. Upon the death of the bishop of Milan in A.D. 374, the people unanimously wanted him to take that position. The orthodox and the Arians were in great conflict as to who their new leader should be. Tradition has it that when young Ambrose walked into the room to settle the issue, a child’s voice was heard above the uproar crying, “Ambrose Bishop!” Ambrose was not a member of the church and had not been baptized. Nevertheless, he was unanimously elected bishop of Milan. He considered this a call of God, gave all his money to the poor, received baptism, and consecrated himself as a bishop. Ambrose had an unbending nature and great courage, and he withstood the strongest rulers. He would not allow the setting aside of any place of worship in Milan for the Arians, even when this was demanded by the mother of the Emperor Valentinian II. Later, he not only refused communion to Maximus who had usurped the throne of the Western Empire, but even to the great emperor Theodosius who was denied admission to church for eight months after he had ordered a massacre of rebels in Thessalonica. The emperor made a complete capitulation, submitting to the discipline of the church. Ambrose was a godly man, a good administrator, a keen theologian, and he was also the first man to introduce hymnology into the church. He was an able preacher whom God used as an instrument to bring Augustine, the greatest theologian of the early church, to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

- B. *Jerome (A.D. 340-420)*: He was baptized in A.D. 360 and for several years was a wandering student in Rome and the cities of Gaul. For the next ten years, he followed the monastic life while he learned Hebrew. This made Jerome about the only western churchman who knew Hebrew, and he was asked to make a new Latin translation of the Bible. This translation is known as the Vulgate, which is the official Bible of the Roman Catholic Church. Jerome was very ascetically minded. He spent 34 years at Bethlehem, where he lived mostly in a cave as a hermit and carried out his immense literary and scholarly labours.
- C. *Augustine (A.D. 354-430)*: Aurelius Augustine must be classed as the greatest theologian since the apostle Paul. Both Protestantism and Roman Catholicism pay tribute to the contribution of Augustine to the cause of Christianity. Luther and Calvin specifically appealed to Augustine as well as to the apostle Paul for their concepts of salvation by grace through faith.
1. *Early Life*: Augustine was born into the home of a Roman official in the North African town of Tagaste. His mother, Monica, was a godly Christian woman who instructed him in the things of Christ. Monica was the “Mrs. Wesley of ancient times.” Augustine did not receive Christ at an early age, but became very rebellious to anything Christian. He went to college at Carthage, and began to run with a filthy crowd of companions. He became very debauched in his sex life. At age 17 he took a young woman as a concubine. When a son was born, he called him Adeodatus (by God given), a strange name under the circumstances. He disliked school, but was interested in philosophy because he was searching for the answers to life. He hated Greek and later lamented this because it would have aided him greatly in his theological studies. Augustine fell into the Manichean philosophy, which was basically a form of Gnosticism in which Christian elements had been reduced to a minimum and oriental elements raised to a maximum.
 2. *His Conversion*: Education, philosophy, licentious living, and religion had not brought any peace into Augustine’s heart. Through the providence of God, Augustine lost his closest friend through death. This shook him, for he had no real answers but only questions. Cypricanus, another friend, told him of a moral pervert named Corianus, who had been converted to Christ and had completely changed. Augustine talked to this Christian convert and was faced again

with the claims of Christ. Later, Augustine went to Milan as a teacher of rhetoric for the government, and there he met Ambrose, who gave him much light on how to be saved and how to understand the Bible. Monica was with him too, and she never stopped praying for the salvation of her son. There was a great conflict in his life between what he knew to be right and his love for sinning. For years he prayed, “O God, grant me chastity and continence, but not yet.”

One day Augustine was in a garden by himself, meditating upon his sinful life, and great remorse came over him. He realized a great change had to be made, but he could not do it in his own strength. He then heard a child’s voice from across the fence say, “*Tolle, lege,*” which means “take up and read.” He picked up a copy of Paul’s epistles which were beside him and opened it to Romans 13:13-14. He read these verses, trusted in Christ, and was gloriously saved (A.D. 386). This was the turning point for Augustine. He dismissed his concubine, resigned his position of teacher of rhetoric, and enrolled as a humble learner to be instructed by the bishop of Milan. On Easter Sunday (A.D. 387) he was baptized. He then went into a monastic way of life.

Through all this Monica had prayed for her son. At one point Monica almost despaired and gave up any hope that her son would be saved, but a friend told her, “A son of so many prayers cannot be lost.” After his conversion, Augustine realized that he was a “child of Monica and grace.” Augustine realized that his salvation was all of God, that he would never have been saved unless God had intervened. He became a great proponent of the grace of God in salvation.

3. *His Rise to Power:* As a monk, he had much time to think and write. He became well known, and in A.D. 395 he was made bishop of Hippo in North Africa. Augustine came forth at a unique time in the church. The Roman Empire was falling. From A.D. 378 to 476 it was quite apparent to historians that Rome would not survive. Barbarians were swarming across her borders. The big question came, “What will happen to the church if the Roman Empire falls? If Rome collapses, can the church survive?” God used Augustine to prepare the church for the inevitable collapse of mighty Rome.
4. *His Writings:* Augustine wrote many things, but his two best known works are *The Confessions*, and *The City of God*. *The Confessions* give us the spiritual heart of this great man. He became famous for the

saying, “Our hearts are restless, O God, until they find their rest in Thee.” In his work *The City of God*, he gives a true Christian philosophy of history. He tells of two cities: the first city, the City of God, consisted of all human and celestial beings united in love to God and seeking his glory alone. The City of Earth is composed of those beings who, loving only self, sought their own glory and good. The supreme dividing principle is that of love. These two cities are in constant conflict in time. After the second coming of the Lord, there will be a judgment. The members of the City of God share in eternal happiness and those of the City of Earth in eternal punishment. The end or goal of history, for Augustine, was outside of history, in the hands of an eternal God.

5. *His Teachings*: He was a strong proponent of the sovereignty of God in every area of life. History is nothing more than *his*-story. All history has been pre-written. Therefore, God himself has been at the very core of everything that has gone on as a managerial executive. No events are outside God’s planning. Because he was saved from such a life of sin, Augustine was strong on sovereign grace in salvation. He taught clearly and boldly on election, predestination and the utter corruption of man. He exalted only the Cross as able to save a sinner. He also stood very strongly for the orthodox view of the Trinity.
6. *His Controversies*: Augustine spent much of his time fighting Manicheism, Donatism and Pelagianism.
 - a. *Manicheism*: Having been a victim of this philosophy for over two years, Augustine after his conversion fought it with every ounce of strength in him.
 - b. *Donatism*: Augustine also had a conflict with the Donatists who were dedicated Christians in North Africa. They were sound in the Christian Faith and were anything but heretics. The Donatists took their name from their leader Donatus. Their difference with Augustine was over the purity of the visible church. They were not heretics but schismatics, that is, they caused a division in the church. The Donatists came into existence when the emperor Diocletian brought a terrible persecution to the North African Christians. Many professing Christians fled (lapsed ones) while many others stayed, suffered and died. The Donatists were those Christians who did not want

to receive the lapsed ones back into fellowship unless they were re-baptized. The Donatists put up their own bishop in place of the Catholic bishop who had fled. The Donatists believed: (1) the visible Church should be made up of true believers only; (2) the church and state should be separate; and (3) the sacraments are for the true Church only. Augustine believed: (1) the visible church should include anyone who wants to be admitted — perhaps the unsaved will be converted; (2) the church has a right to ask the state for help to put down heresy; and (3) the sacraments are for anyone inside the visible church. Augustine himself called upon the state to help stamp out the schismatics in North Africa, and the Donatists were terribly persecuted. There was no love between these two groups. The Donatists called the Catholic Church at Rome “leaven,” “Babylon,” “apostates” and “antichrists.” Augustine did as much mudslinging as the Donatists.

- c. *Pelagianism*: Pelagianism was a heresy started by Pelagius, a British monk, who denied that the human race had fallen in Adam and that the sinner was helpless to save himself. He claimed that Adam’s sin did not pass to every member of the human race, but was merely a bad example. He taught that every person born into this world has a free will and can choose for or against God at any time. Therefore, there is no need for an inward working of grace to empower man to turn to Christ, for man does not need God’s help. Pelagius found his way to North Africa and immediately came into conflict with Augustine. Augustine, being Pauline in theology, believed that all men had sinned in Adam and that Adam’s sin had passed on to every member of the human race. Man was totally depraved and unable to do any spiritual good. Thus, unsaved men are totally dependent upon God for salvation. Augustine spelled out clearly the biblical views of sovereign election and predestination. Salvation was for Augustine a work of God from start to finish.

Pelagius experienced considerable opposition almost as soon as he arrived in North Africa. He was condemned by a Carthaginian Synod in A.D. 412, by Pope Innocent I in A.D. 416, by a general council of African churches in A.D. 413, and finally by the ecumenical council at Ephesus in A.D. 431. The Council of Ephesus upheld the teachings of Augustine as the

orthodox position of Christianity. This did not mean, however, the complete triumph of Augustinianism. Augustine was a man ahead of his time, and was way ahead of the church of his day. When Pelagianism was condemned, a sort of semi-Pelagianism became popular in the church. Semi-Pelagianism taught that man was affected by Adam's sin, but not so badly that his will could not respond to God. They taught that election was according to prescience (foresight), and that it is up to the individual to accept or refuse God's offer of grace. The Synod of Orange in A.D. 529 condemned the teachings of the semi-Pelagians as heretical. The Reformers (Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, etc.), in turn, all returned to Augustine and Paul for their concepts of God's sovereign grace in salvation through the death of Jesus Christ.

Two Viewpoints on Sin			
Non-orthodox Pelagianism (Condemned as Heresy A.d. 431)		Orthodox Augustinianism	
Semi-Pelagianism (Condemned as Heresy A.d. 529)	Socinianism	Semi-Augustinianism	Gregory the Great
Arminianism (Condemned as Heresy 1618)			Reformers
Methodists most Baptists Pentecostals Assembly of God Church of God Brethren churches Mennonites some Independents	Liberals Neo-liberals Neo-orthodox Unitarians		Presbyterians Lutherans Dutch Reformed Church of England some Baptists some Independents

7. *Positive Effects from Augustine's Ministry:* (1) He prepared the church for the fall of Rome, and his teachings were predominant in the Roman Catholic Church in the Middle Ages (except on sin and grace). (2) He was a clear thinker on the sovereignty of

God in history and in salvation, which set the Reformers to thinking. (3) He set forth a clear Christian philosophy of history based on the supernatural. (4) He, as no other mind since the time of the apostles, has made a deep impression on Christian thought, whether Protestant, Roman Catholic, scholastic or mystic.

8. *Negative Aspects from Augustine's Ministry:* (1) He taught there was no salvation outside the visible Catholic Church (with its traditionalism and sacramentalism). (2) He favored ascetic monasticism, fostered the use of relics and pushed the concept of purgatory. (3) He felt that it was impossible to be a saved person without ritual water baptism. (4) He plunged the state deeper into the affairs of the church in the persecution of the Donatists.