

Augustine (354-430AD)



Augustine came from Numidia in North Africa. He had a Christian mother, Monica, who prayed for him. His father only wanted him to get on well in the world. How sad Monica was when she saw that her son lived a sinful life! Like his father, Augustine was not a Christian – at first.

Augustine knew he was sinful. He found he could not give up his sin. He was working in Milan in Italy as a teacher. Here he heard the preaching of Ambrose of Milan. It moved him but he could not find peace. Nor could he give up his sin.

“At last,” he wrote, “I threw myself down under a fig-tree, and cried.”

At that moment he heard a voice. It sounded like a child playing, perhaps in the garden next-door. “Take up and read, take up and read,” said the voice.

“That is strange,” he thought, “I have never heard a child's game that goes like that before.”

“Take up and read, take up and read,” repeated the voice over and over again.

Augustine got up. He picked up the Bible that was beside him. He opened it and found himself reading the end of Romans chapter 13: “...put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof.”

His sad doubts vanished away. At that moment he put all his trust in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Monica was so happy. Now her prayers were answered.

Later Augustine became Bishop of Hippo. (now called Annaba) in North Africa (395AD). He lived at the time when the Western Roman Empire was breaking up. Even as he lay dying, the town of Hippo was being besieged by enemies. This break up led

him to write his best known book, the *City of God*. "Rome has fallen," he said, "but the City of God will never fall".

By the City of God Augustine meant the church. But Augustine had some ideas about the church that are not in the Bible. Because he was a great man people took up his ideas. They were ideas that led to much misery. What ideas?

Augustine taught that salvation comes through the church. This is wrong. Salvation comes from Jesus Christ, the Bible says. Augustine taught that salvation come to us through the church by means of the sacraments. What are sacraments? The Lord's Supper and baptism are what he meant by this word. The Bible says that baptism and the Lord's Supper are signs. Baptism is a sign that the person being baptised is already a Christian. The Lord Supper is a remembrance of Jesus' death. Salvation comes from Jesus Christ not from "sacraments." The thief on the cross was not baptised. He did not take communion. But he was saved.

"You can only be saved if you are baptised into the church," said Augustine. "If people will become Christians by listening to preaching, that is good," he said. "They can be baptised and so saved. But some people will not listen to preaching. Then we must punish them and force them into being converted and baptised. It might not be as good as if they converted willingly but it would be better than if they were lost."

This is a horrible idea but it makes sense if you believe that being baptised saves you. Augustine forgot that real conversion is a spiritual experience. What do you think happened when church officials took up these ideas? They persecuted people if they would not join the church. People who had been baptised but who were still pagans in their hearts wanted to join the church to escape persecution. They were baptised and were treated as if they were real Christians. They did not love the Lord Jesus in their hearts. They were really still pagans. Many real Christians saw this was wrong and wanted to set up their own churches. They did not want to be part of a church that persecuted people and forced them to join it.

"No!" said the church leaders, "There is only one church. If you set up another church it is a false church." They began to persecute Christians who wanted to worship in a church which taught the truth. This persecution carried on and on. It carried on all through the middle ages. It carried on until the reformation. It carries on in parts of the

world even still. Augustine's wrong idea had a sad outcome.