

## 2. The church and the world: Constantine and Augustine

### 1. Introduction

#### (a) Where is your home?

By the end of the first century, all the apostles were dead, most of them as martyrs. Various biblical writings circulated to sustain the church – the OT and the NT. Divergent voices rose within the church – issues of heresy cut in, to which we'll turn next week. All of this occurred during periodic yet brutal campaigns by the Roman Empire to exterminate the church.

A new challenge came when the Emperor Constantine accepted and then endorsed the Christian faith. This raised many new questions for the church about the relationship between earthly and heavenly authority. And it asked this question of Christian people that is asked of us in every generation: Where is your home? Where do you belong?

Sometimes in this course we'll cover lots of ground. Sometimes we'll slow right down. Our plan today is to look at two men: the Emperor Constantine and the church leader Augustine of Hippo. We'll hear a little bit about their lives. But we'll think particularly about their roles in relationship to this question: Where is your home?

Some acknowledgements: the material here drawn heavily on the Church History survey from Capitol Hill Baptist Church and on resources from Dr Garry Williams (his Oak Hill church history survey, his wonderful book *Silent Witnesses*, and his lecture on Augustine from EMA 2013).

Let me pray for us, and then read a few Scriptures that speak to our question.

#### (b) Scriptures

Psalms 87:1-3, On the holy mount stands the city he founded; the LORD loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwelling places of Jacob. Glorious things of you are spoken, O city of God.

Ephesians 2:19, So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God,

Hebrews 11:8-10,13-16, By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God... These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

1 Peter 1:17, And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile...

## 2. The Emperor Constantine (b.274 – d.337)



### **(a) What did he do?**

In 312, a dramatic political change occurred in Rome that would have profound consequences for the Christian faith. Constantine was in England when he became emperor, following his father's death. On his journey back to Rome, to claim his crown and do battle with his rival (Maxentius) he had an extraordinary experience which he later recounted to the church historian Eusebius 330AD. Here are his words:

*Constantine was praying to his father's god, beseeching him to tell him who he was and imploring him to stretch out his right hand to help him in his present difficulties. While he was fervently praying, an incredible sign appeared to him from heaven. (It would be hard to believe his account if it had been told by anyone else. But the victorious emperor long afterwards declared it to the writer of this history -- when I was honored to meet and talk with him and he even confirmed his statement by an oath. Thus, who could doubt him, especially since time has established its truth?) He said that about noon, when the day was already beginning to decline, he saw with his own eyes the trophy of a cross of light in the heavens, above the sun, and an inscription that said 'Conquer by This' attached to it. Seeing this, he and his army, which followed him on an expedition and witnessed the miracle, were struck with amazement. He said that he doubted within himself what importance the vision might hold. He continued to ponder its meaning through until he fell asleep. While sleeping, the Christ of God appeared to him with the same sign he had seen earlier in the heavens. God commanded him to make a likeness of that sign which he had seen in the heavens and to use it as a safeguard in all encounters with his enemies.*

Next day Constantine destroyed Maxentius' army at the Battle of Milvian Bridge, just outside Rome. And he vowed to serve this new God who had given him the victory.

Constantine's conversion had a dramatic effect on the position of the church. In 313, the Edict of Milan declared that Christians should be free to worship without opposition and returned church property which had been confiscated. Constantine summoned the first ecumenical council and enforced its decisions across the Empire.

By the end of the fourth century, the church had spread well beyond its early roots, to encompass most of Europe, north Africa, Ethiopia, Persia, India and many other places. It had grown to a significant size numerically and had even become the official religion of the Roman Empire with all the protections and privileges that brought. It had become more organised with a system of bishops overseeing groups of churches and central councils to determine church policy and theology. There were two main centres of the church, in the East at Alexandria, and in the West at Rome

## **(b) Evaluation?**

Much as these measures brought great relief to the church, **Constantine's own faith is a puzzle.** He seems to have embraced it as much for political benefit as out of genuine conviction; after all, Rome still operated under the assumption that the emperor was to seek the favor of the gods for Rome's benefit. While he did not permit his own image to be worshipped in the temple, he allowed the imperial cult to remain, and continued to practice some pagan rites. He also maintained images of pagan deities on his coinage for more than a decade, most notably his personal favorite, the Sun, which he may have identified with Christ.

Theologically he remained confused, flip-flopping between Arianism and orthodoxy, often depending on which side seemed to be more powerful rather than on which side was true. A man with a fierce temper, he had both his wife and his son put to death on charges of adultery (it is unclear if the charges were valid or not). Finally, Constantine refused to be baptized until on his deathbed, perhaps out of a fear of mortal sin or a rather superstitious belief in the power of baptism. After he died in 337, a succession of emperors veered between orthodoxy, Arianism, and paganism, until Theodosius I at the end of the century ordered the destruction of all pagan temples and made Christianity the official state religion of Rome.

It is true that **Constantine did much that was good.** He brought relief to the church. He made huge financial gifts – this had the effect, for example, of neutralizing paganism in Cappadocia largely through the church's charitable work. He passed godly laws: he banned crucifixion and gladiatorial shows... made Sunday a holiday... supported marriage... banned the branding of criminals' faces because those faces reflected the image of God. He was desperate to maintain peace *within* the church, using his power to convene church councils like the Council of Nicea in AD325 that we'll look at next week.

But he left **a genuinely mixed legacy to the church down the ages.** He regarded himself as the "13<sup>th</sup> Apostle"! He wanted to use Christ's power to serve the Roman Empire. And he wanted the Roman Empire to fight some of the church's battles. This significantly confused the relationship between the church and the state.

As Christianity became a cultural norm – a means of advancement in places – it encouraged nominal or outward Christianity.

Constantine used the power of the state to enforce orthodoxy. The persecuted became persecutors: he banned pagans from the army and sometimes put Christian heretics to death.

These problems never disappeared from the church and indeed grew massively in the Medieval period as medieval monarchies and Roman Catholic papacy were entangled together. Nor were these problems solved at the Reformation either. Our heroes – like Luther and Calvin – actually sought to enlist the coercive power of the state in support of Biblical Christianity.

### **Some applications for us today:**

The state cannot make the church grow. Don't imagine that returning to some long gone Christian Britain will solve our problems. State approval and societal approval brings as many problems.

Don't ever confuse one particular country or state with God's special covenant people. This is, I suspect, an error of some American evangelicals – yes, they've lived in blessed country, but it is not God's own country. And it's to Augustine that we're going to turn to consider this some more.

### 3. Augustine of Hippo (b.354 – d.430)

#### (a) Augustine's conversion

The most influential and important of the Fathers was **Augustine of Hippo**. Maybe even the greatest thinker the church has ever known. Theology, politics, ethics have all been stamped with his thought.

He was born in 354 in Thagaste in what is now Algeria. He had a pagan father and a Christian mother, Monica. He led an incredibly immoral life – he was addicted to sexual sin. But writing in his famous *Confessions*, Augustine said he never found total pleasure in his sin: “you were always with me, mercifully punishing me, touching with a bitter taste all my illicit pleasures.” That was a sign of grace!

Augustine was a brilliant pagan mind. He taught rhetoric in North Africa, Milan and Rome. In Milan he heard Christian sermons from Bishop Ambrose. From there on he felt himself tugged in two directions: “I was caught up to you by your beauty and quickly torn away from you by my weight... This weight was my sexual habit.”

The more he heard of the Gospel, the more wretched and sinful he knew himself to be. He recalled the agony of listening to a Christian called Ponticianus speak one day:

*... I could see how vile I was, how trusted and filthy, covered in sores and ulcers. And I looked and was appalled, but there was no way of escaping from myself... you once again placed me in front of myself; you thrust me before my own eyes so that I should discover my iniquity and hate it... the day had now come when I stood naked to myself.*

Augustine longed for God, but knew he was sinful through and through. Later, as he reflected on the Bible, he would give us the deepest and most faithful doctrine of sin: Adam's children are bound in sin – we sin necessarily but voluntarily. The non-believer has no choice but to sin, and yet loves to do so. Until one day God's sovereign grace broke in:

*Now when deep reflection had drawn up out of the secret depths of my soul all my misery and had heaped it up before the sight of my heart, there arose a mighty storm, accompanied by a mighty rain of tears...And, not indeed in these words, but in this effect, I cried out to thee: 'And thou, O Lord, how long? How long, O Lord? Wilt thou be angry forever? Oh, remember not against us our former iniquities.'...I was saying these things and weeping in the most bitter contrition of my heart, when suddenly I heard the voice of a boy or girl I know not which – coming from the neighboring house, chanting over and over again, 'Pick it up, read it; pick it up, read it.'...So I quickly returned to the bench..., for there I had put down the apostle's book when I had left there. I snatched it up, opened it, and in silence read the paragraph on which my eyes first fell: 'Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh to fulfill the lusts thereof.' I wanted to read no further, nor did I need to. For instantly, as the sentence ended, there was infused in my heart something like the light of full certainty and all the gloom of doubt vanished away.*



### (b) Augustine's ministry

Augustine studied under Ambrose. He became Bishop of Hippo in North Africa. He immersed himself in the theological and philosophical arguments of the day. This was no mere intellectual indulgence for him. Rather, as a pastor, he saw the consequences of false teachings and errors in the daily lives of those under his care.

We'll look at one key feature of Augustine's teaching THIS session, and another feature NEXT week. But for now let me mention a couple of strengths weaknesses.

Above all, Augustine knew and taught total depravity and sovereign saving grace. Luther would discover this in the Reformation – like Augustine in his own experience, and in the Scriptures, and as he read Augustine for himself.

Some of Augustine's thinking, through, was wrong – and would lie behind some of the errors of Roman Catholicism: purgatory, baptismal regeneration (i.e. that baptism makes you born again), the idea that the church can dispense God's grace – all ideas come from him.

B.B. Warfield concluded that the Reformation was a "triumph of Augustine's doctrine of grace over Augustine's doctrine of the church."

### (c) Augustine's masterpiece: *The City of God*

Here we come to the question we began with. Where is your home? Where do you live?

Augustine lived in an extraordinary era. Try to imagine this for a moment. He was born just a few years after the final waves of state persecution ended. He lived, mainly, in a Christian Roman Empire. Then, as he lay dying, came the earth-shattering news that Rome itself was falling. Hippo was surrounded by Vandals while on his deathbed. Carthage fell in 439. The city of Rome in 455. The whole western empire in 476. He lived in a Christianised Empire in its dying days.

He wrote the *City of God* in the immediate aftermath of Rome's invasion by barbarians in 410. There were pagan critics who Christianity for this catastrophe. But there were also Christians – like the great Jerome – whose faith was shaken to the core by their beloved city's demise. We cannot imagine what it was like to live life in the *idea* of Rome. For many Christians, in the days since Constantine, it had almost become like the Kingdom of God on earth.

Augustine made clear that Christians inhabit two "cities": the city of man, the earthly city, the world... and there is the City of God. In this life we inhabit both cities, and must be good citizens of both, but must never confuse the two – which some Christians had done in identifying Rome as the perfect city. After all, God's kingdom was not bound to any earthly kingdom, and just as Christians could not achieve their own salvation, neither could they create an eternal paradise on earth, for their – and our – final home is in heaven.

Here – and by way of application for us – let me give us **an anatomy of the earthly city** followed by **how we ought to respond**. This is courtesy of Garry Williams' EMA 2013 lecture.

#### **A brief anatomy of the earthly city:**

1. There are ONLY two cities – there is nowhere else – the heavenly city and the earthly city.
2. The earthly city is especially manifest at certain points, but is EVERYWHERE that the heavenly city is not.

3. The earthly city is demonic – it is from Satan.
4. Both cities are driven by love (and this is so, so important for understanding our times): either love for God, or love for self.
5. You can understand the earthly city as being driven by disordered love. Sin does not make or create anything. Rather, it consists in loving a good thing wrongly. It makes created things our final end.
6. The earthly city is divided against itself. Each citizen wants to be God and will not be content to live equal with others and under the reign of the true God. They are dominated by a lust for power, and as soon as powerful enough will oppress others.
7. The earthly city faces eternal destruction – a state of eternal way, in hell.

### **How should we respond?**

Firstly, there is NO NEUTRAL GROUND. Expect conflict between the two cities. Augustine doesn't have a third and neutral thing called "the state"! Where do we get the idea that the state – government and so on – is neutral? Augustine was persuaded from reading the apostle Paul that we are all *individually sinners*, and so there's no reason at all to think that by coming together we become collectively neutral! The state is just a sinful gathering!

Does this matter? If you believe that whole spaces of life in the world are neutral then you will be unprepared for conflict and you will become worldly yourself. The whole of life is a place of our worship – and it will be a place of conflict. For, we live in a hostile land – we are strangers and we are exiles here. We will be a burdensome nuisance to the earthly city as we oppose their gods. Don't be surprised by conflict and evil. Are there places where we have dropped our guard? Have we wrongly begun to imagine that some part of life is neutral?

Secondly, DON'T PIN YOUR HOPES ON THE WORLD. Early Christians were wrong to pin their hopes on Constantine and this world. It meant that Ambrose and Jerome thought that end of Rome was the End of the World. The ideal of Rome was too great. Though, of course, Augustine still wanted a Christian ruler (contra some nowadays who oppose the idea of Constantinianism).

We are meant to be restless here. We hope for what we do not see. Augustine pointed out that whilst Constantine had been converted the Devil is not! We will not see the City of God on earth. Have WE – perhaps some of us older ones especially – pinned too many hopes on a Christian Britain? Look forward.

Thirdly, DON'T WITHDRAW as you relate to the earthly city. Sociologically, you cannot withdraw because the city of God and the earthly city are interwoven.

We will have shared interests with the earthly city – the stuff of common grace, things that keep us alive. But WE will use those things to another end. Whereas the pagan uses those things as an end.

We live in the world... we use the things of the world... but we do so humbly and for the glory of God. Our ability to that has to do with how our LOVES are ordered: God and His glory and His End – they are to be our greatest loves, under which all other commitments find their place.

Fourthly, DON'T FORGET WHERE THE EARTHLY CITY IS LOCATED. It's not just "out there." There remains in each and every Christian the warring remnant of the earthly city. The flesh still fights against the Spirit. We ARE in the midst of evils... but evils are also WITHIN us.

So, what are those faulty “loves” which trouble us? Is it sex (as with Augustine as a young man)... or lack of control with respect to food and drink... or is it love for power in our relationships (that’s what really worried Augustine the minister) – do I serve Christ for God’s glory or the glory of self?

We’re encouraged to examine ourselves... to repent, and to seek each other’s help in that... and to rest of that sovereign grace.