

The Development of the Doctrine of the Covenant (4): Augustine

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So far in our series, we have seen that the early church in her dogmas of the Trinity and the Person and natures of Christ laid foundations for the doctrine of the covenant. She also used the covenant as a basis for both the unity of the Bible and the unity of the church of all ages. The church fathers did speak of salvation in organic terms and even occasionally spoke of fellowship with God, but they were not what we would call “covenant theologians.” Neither was Augustine, yet he served to lay the third dogma which was foundational to the doctrine of the covenant: sovereign grace rooted in eternal, unconditional election.

Aurelius Augustinus (354-430), better known as Augustine, is probably the most influential theologian in the history of the post-apostolic church, especially in the West. There he set most of the agenda for dogmatic reflection for the next millennium and more with his many and manifold writings, especially his *Confessions*, *The City of God* and *On the Trinity*.¹ Certainly the greatest dogmatician, metaphysician, ethicist and philosopher of the church fathers, he assimilated the church’s teaching up to that point and formulated clearer and more developed doctrines of the Trinity, original sin and the history of redemption. However, most importantly, as Herman Bavinck notes,

Augustine was the first to develop the doctrine of grace, taken not in the sense of a divine attribute, but in the sense of the benefits which God through Christ grants to the church.²

¹Cf. Thomas Cahill:

If the ancient eastern (or Greek) church has many “fathers”—theologians who articulated the classical formulations of faith to the Greco-Roman world—the ancient western (or Latin) church has only one worth speaking of: Augustine (*How the Irish Saved Civilization: The Untold Story of Ireland’s Heroic Role from the Fall of Rome to the Rise of Medieval Europe* [USA: AnchorBooks, Doubleday, 1995], p. 63).

It was Augustine who made it impossible for the church to ignore the subject of God's grace.³

Several factors contributed to Augustine's doctrine of sovereign grace. First, his conversion to Christianity was from a life of fornication and pride. He saw his moral bondage and love of sin and realized that he was unable to will the good.⁴ Second, his main teacher in his very early days as a Christian was Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, who arguably had the best grasp of original sin of any at that time. Third, before Augustine was called upon to defend God's sovereign grace, he had already been proved and equipped in struggles with both the Manichees and the Donatists.⁵ Fourth, Augustine's work *On the Trinity* led him to greater insights into the glory of the Triune God, and his study for and writing of *The City of God* gave him deeper appreciation for the sovereignty of God over all of history.⁶ From eternity past through time into eternity future, the timeless God is in control and ordering all things according to His eternal purpose in Jesus Christ with respect to the two cities: the city of God (the elect) and the city of man (the reprobate).⁷ Fifth, Augustine's doctrine of grace was developed further and sharpened in his battles with the Pelagians and the Semi-Pelagians (as they later were called).⁸

Augustine denied that man is morally neutral, equipoised between good and evil (Pelagianism); nor is he merely spiritually sick (Semi-Pelagianism).

³Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God*, trans. William Hendriksen (Great Britain: BOT, repr. 1991), p. 208.

³This is a point often made by Jaroslav Pelikan in his magisterial five volume *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971-1989).

⁴Thus the sovereign grace of God is a major theme in Augustine's *Confessions* written soon after his conversion and call to the ministry.

⁵The Manichees were dualists and ascetics who believed in two eternal principles: God and Matter, or Light and Darkness, or Good and Evil. The Donatists were schismatics who, while holding the catholic faith, separated themselves in order to establish the pure church.

⁶There was an overlap between the time of the writing of these two works (*On the Trinity* and *The City of God*) and the Pelagian/Semi-Pelagian controversy. Both these books were helpful to Augustine in formulating his doctrine of grace and they were themselves influenced by this struggle.

⁷Cf. Augustine, *The City of God*, xv:1, trans. Marcus Dods, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, First Series, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, repr. 1983), pp. 284-285.

Rather man is dead in trespasses and sins. Man was perfectly righteous before the Fall, but all men sinned in Adam and are polluted and guilty in him.⁹ A penal sentence of death was justly inflicted upon all men.¹⁰ Thus all man's spiritual graces were lost and turned into the opposite. Man's understanding was darkened and his will was enslaved in sin so that he was unable not to sin (*non posse non peccare*) and unable to choose God who is the Good (total inability).¹¹ All the best works of the heathen, Augustine realized, are only "splendid vices," for unregenerate man is able only to sin. The latter half of Romans 7 treats of the baptized not the unconverted. Thus man is totally depraved and all of salvation must be of God's sovereign mercy.

For Augustine, *grace* is efficacious because *God's decree* is efficacious and God's decree is efficacious because *God* is a sovereign, efficacious God who does whatsoever He wills. Grace is also particular. God sovereignly decreed to reprobate some and choose others.¹² Contrary to the Semi-Pelagians, Augustine taught that election and reprobation were not on the basis of foreseen faith or foreseen unbelief. The elect receive grace and the reprobate do not, and no other reason can be sought than the inscrutable will of God.

Augustine taught the election of the saints in Christ *as members of His body*: "As, therefore, that one man [Christ] was predestined to be our Head, so we being many are predestinated to be His members."¹³

⁸To express the matter differently, Augustine's doctrine of grace was rooted in the Bible, experienced in his conversion, suggested by ideas of Ambrose, supported by other doctrinal studies and occasioned by the Pelagian and Semi-Pelagian controversies.

⁹Although not stating that original guilt is the judicial grounds for original pollution, Augustine does clearly teach that we are guilty in Adam's transgression (e.g., *Enchiridion*, xlvi, trans. J. F. Shaw, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, First Series, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. III [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, repr. 1988], pp. 252-253).

¹⁰Death is a *punishment* upon all men, for all have sinned. This is Augustine's understanding of Romans 5:12. Augustine even taught that God punishes sin with sin.

¹¹Augustine, *Enchiridion*, xxx, p. 247.

¹²Augustine followed what is now called the infralapsarian scheme.

¹³Augustine, *On the Predestination of the Saints*, xiv:31, trans. Peter Holmes and Robert Earnest Wallis, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, First Series, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, repr. 1983), p. 513.

Moreover, Augustine also taught reprobation:

[God] used the very will of the creature which was working in opposition to the Creator's will as an instrument for carrying out His will, the supremely Good thus turning to good account even what is evil, *to the condemnation of those whom in His justice he has predestined to punishment.*¹⁴

[The human] race we have distributed into two parts, the one consisting of those who live according to man, the other of those who live according to God. And these we also mystically call the two cities, or the two communities of men, of which *the one is predestined to reign eternally with God, and the other to suffer eternal punishment with the devil.*¹⁵

In this last quotation, Augustine sees the antithesis between the city of God and the city of man (both in human history and in the final states of Heaven and Hell) as flowing from eternal election and reprobation.

Furthermore, for Augustine, reprobation serves election. In his *On the Predestination of the Saints* he writes, "By His own good use of [the reprobate] they [are] of advantage to the vessels of mercy."¹⁶

In several places Augustine teaches particular redemption. In *On the Trinity* he writes,

In this redemption, the blood of Christ was given, as it were as a price for us, by accepting which the devil was not enriched, but bound: that we might be loosened from his bonds, and that he might not with himself involve [us] in the meshes

¹⁴Augustine, *Enchiridion*, c, p. 269. In the two previous chapters, Augustine speaks of God's hatred—which he does not understand as "loving less"—of Esau and His hardening of the lost (*Enchiridion*, xcvi-xcix, pp. 268-269). Thus Richard A. Muller wrongly denies that the *Enchiridion* teaches reprobation ("Reformation, Augustinianism in," in *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999], p. 706).

¹⁵Augustine, *The City of God*, xv:1, p. 284; italics mine.

¹⁶Augustine, *On the Predestination of the Saints*, xvi:33, p. 514.

of sins, and so deliver to the destruction of the second and eternal death, *any one of those whom Christ, free from all debt, had redeemed by pouring out his own blood unindebtedly*; but that *they who belong to the grace of Christ, foreknown, and predestinated, and elected before the foundation of the world, should only so far die as Christ Himself died for them, i.e. only by the death of the flesh, not of the spirit.*¹⁷

In connection with the remaining two of the five points of Calvinism, irresistible grace and the perseverance of the saints, Augustine's doctrine of baptismal regeneration caused him to err somewhat. All who were baptized, he held, were regenerated, but not all of them were elect and would be saved, for some would, by their sin, fall from grace.¹⁸ Nevertheless, those elected to grace and glory would persevere because they would be preserved by the omnipotent, irresistible grace of God.

Augustine's view of sovereign grace had positive implications for his doctrine of preaching.¹⁹ He saw that God uses preaching to save sinners by giving them faith.²⁰ Man's work and goodness is precluded for "both in its increase and in its beginnings, faith is the gift of God."²¹ Moreover, he taught clearly the twofold call of the Gospel: the external call which is

¹⁷Augustine, *On the Trinity*, XIII:xv:19, trans. Arthur West Haddan, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, First Series, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, repr. 1988), p. 178; italics mine; cf. IV:xiii:17, p. 78.

¹⁸This flaw, with others, was to be picked up by later theologians and used to subvert the main theme in Augustine's thought: sovereign, particular and irresistible grace.

¹⁹Cf. Hughes Oliphant Old: "Augustine had a strong theology of grace, and a strong theology of grace leads to a strong emphasis on revelation. Sermon after sermon *we find our preacher intent on nothing so much as explaining the Holy Scriptures*, for there it was that God revealed himself" (*The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*, vol. 2 [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998], pp. 345-346; italics mine).

²⁰Cf. Augustine's significant reference to preaching in the very opening section of his *Confessions*: "It is my faith that calls to you, Lord, *the faith which you gave me and made to live in me* through the merits of your Son, who became man, and *through the ministry of your preacher*" (*Confessions*, i:1, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin [England: Penguin, 1961], p. 21; italics mine).

²¹Augustine, *On the Predestination of the Saints*, xi:22, p. 508. In this section Augustine has some excellent arguments against a conditional promise of the gospel to the reprobate (xi. 20-22, pp. 508-509).

rejected by the wicked and the internal call which operates through the preached word in those who are predestinated.²² After citing II Corinthians 2:12-13, Augustine comments on the effect of the preaching on the saved and the reprobate,

See concerning what [Paul] gives thanks,—that the apostles are a sweet savour of Christ unto God, both in those who are saved by His grace, *and in those who perish by His judgment*. But in order that those who little understand these things may be less enraged, he himself gives the warning when he adds the words: “And who is sufficient for these things?”²³

Augustine protected the doctrine of God’s grace by his resolute denial of the “well-meant offer” advocated by the Semi-Pelagians. He consistently gives the correct exegesis of Matthew 23:37 and I Timothy 2:4 and denies that God desires to save all men head for head.²⁴ Commenting on the latter text, Augustine writes,

the omnipotent God has [not] willed anything to be done which was not done: for, setting aside all ambiguities, if “He hath done all that He pleased in heaven and in earth [Ps. 115:3], as the psalmist sings of Him, He certainly did not will to do anything that He hath not done.”²⁵

Instead, Augustine affirms that “the will of the Omnipotent is never defeated” and that He “never wills anything that He does not perform.”²⁶

Augustine succeeds in presenting the omnipotent, sovereign Lord as more transcendent and yet at the same time more immanent than any of his predecessors. Augustine’s God is above time and space creating and upholding all things by the word of His power. Yet He is always near us,

²²Augustine, *On the Predestination of the Saints*, xvi:32, p. 513.

²³Augustine, *On the Predestination of the Saints*, xx:41, p. 518.

²⁴Augustine, *Enchiridion*, xcvi, pp. 267-268; ciii, pp. 270-271.

²⁵Augustine, *Enchiridion*, ciii, p. 271.

²⁶Augustine, *Enchiridion*, cii, p. 270. Psalm 105:3 and Psalm 135:6 undergird the whole treatment here (cf. *Enchiridion* xcvi, p. 267; xcvi, p. 268; ciii, p. 271).

preserving us, directing us and speaking in our hearts by His Word. Man is born in sin and shapen in iniquity through his fall in Adam, yet despite being so far away, God's grace can reach Him. Here Augustine's trinitarian theology serves him well. The Lord of heaven and earth sent His Son to be our mediator. He who is both God and man can reconcile us to God by his blood.²⁷ The Spirit then pours out the love of God in our hearts enabling us to love God and do good works to His glory.²⁸

Joseph T. Leinhard points out that "Augustine was the first Christian writer to elaborate a theory of Christian friendship."²⁹ In his *Confessions* Augustine makes the insightful remark:

No friends are true friends unless you, my God, bind them fast to one another through that love which is sown in our hearts by the Holy Ghost who is given to us.³⁰

Elect angels also partake of this fellowship with redeemed man: "All men and *all spirits* who humbly seek the glory of God and not their own, and who follow him in piety, belong to *one fellowship*."³¹

Though speaking of the relationship between fellow Christians and angels as friendship, Augustine less frequently speaks of the relationship between the saints and the living God in this way. Nevertheless references can be found. At the very end of the first part of *The City of God*, Augustine speaks of the incarnation and redemption of Christ as "the way which leads straight to the vision of God and to *eternal fellowship with Him*, according to the true predictions and statements of the Holy Scripture."³²

²⁷The Pelagian conception of Christ merely as our example led Augustine to emphasize that Christ, who is both God and man, is our Mediator who was sacrificed for our sins, without, however, denying that Christians must imitate Christ.

²⁸Augustine was particularly fond of Romans 5:5.

²⁹Joseph T. Leinhard also points out that Augustine read Cicero's *Laelius, On Friendship*, to which he referred often ("Friendship, Friends," in *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, p. 372).

³⁰Augustine, *Confessions*, iv:4, p. 75.

³¹Augustine, *On the Catechising of the Uninstructed*, xix:31, trans. S. D. F. Salmond, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, First Series, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, repr. 1983), p. 303; italics mine.

³²Augustine, *The City of God*, x:32, p. 204; italics mine.

As regards Augustine's view of fellowship in the Trinity, opinions vary. For example Thomas Cahill writes that for Augustine,

God is One—as in the “Old” Testament, the scripture of the Jews—but at the heart of reality is relation, the relatedness of *friends*: for God the One is Three, the Father who loves the Son, the Son begotten of the Father's love from all eternity, and the Holy Spirit—the love of the Father and the Son, so strong that it forms a third “person” in this divine Trinity.³³

On the other hand, Lienhard states, “Augustine regularly insists that friendship may not be predicated of God, since it is an accident.”³⁴ This is more in accord with the following quotation from Augustine's *On the Trinity*:

Therefore the Holy Spirit, whatever it is, is something common both to the Father and the Son. But that communion itself is consubstantial and coeternal; and *if it may fitly be called friendship, let it be so called; but it is more aptly called love.*³⁵

This passage indicates that the idea of friendship in the Trinity definitely occurred to Augustine. He does not totally oppose this conception but seems to have a personal preference for speaking of the relationship within the Trinity in terms of *love*. Thus whereas the Reformed make covenant friendship primary and subsume Christian doctrines under it and understand them in the light of it, Augustine makes love basic and primary and places friendship under it.

Thus Cahill is wrong to present Augustine's view of the Trinity as one of friendship—for this is not Augustine's terminology—but he is correct to point out that for Augustine God is Triune and “the heart of [this divine] reality is *relation*.” In this sense, we can easily understand Cahill's

³³Cahill, *Op. cit.*, p. 63; italics mine.

³⁴Lienhard, *Op. cit.*, p. 373.

³⁵Augustine, *On the Trinity*, VI:v:7, p. 100; italics mine.

mistake. What is the relationship between the Father and the Son? The perfect love of the Holy Spirit. And surely this love may be called *friendship*. This conclusion is supported by considering that, for Augustine, God effects fellowship between his children on earth and between them and the angels in heaven. Thus Augustine's teaching of the loving personal relationship of the Three Persons of the Godhead, though differing verbally from our presentation of God's covenant friendship, is essentially the same glorious reality.

In this framework of the transcendent yet immanent, personal Triune God and elect man—creaturely, fallen and yet saved in Christ—we have all the ingredients for fully fledged covenant fellowship between God and man. Yet we are running ahead of ourselves, for Augustine never articulated it as such nor did he manage to put all the pieces together in this fashion. For although Augustine talked about friendship, the Trinity, paedobaptism (in both the Donatist and the Pelagian controversies), our union with Adam in his fall (Pelagian controversy) and with Christ in election and calling (in both the Pelagian and Semi-Pelagian controversies) and sovereign grace (in both the Pelagian and Semi-Pelagian controversies) he did not, as we would today, relate them to the covenant. Also he had some faulty views: his conception of evil as negation, several elements in his doctrine of the church including baptismal regeneration, his denial of the perseverance of all those regenerated in baptism, his openness to prayers for the dead and the veneration of martyrs and relics. These pieces were part of a different jigsaw and would be used to form the religion of Roman Catholicism.

Nevertheless, Augustine served God well in his day and generation. The times were not yet ripe for a fuller development of the doctrine of the covenant; this work was left for the church in later years. Occasionally, Augustine spoke of salvation as friendship with believers and angels and, hence, even with God, but his greatest contribution to the doctrine of the covenant is the foundational doctrine of God's sovereign and particular grace rooted in eternal election.