

Question: Who was Augustine of Hippo?

Answer: St. Augustine lived from 354-430 AD. He is considered a Doctor of the Church for both his insights and leadership during troubled times. Augustine was both a prolific writer and speaker. He was trained in the arts of rhetoric and philosophy as a young man with the hopes of someday becoming a lawyer. After his conversion to Christianity, Augustine transferred his mastery of rhetoric and philosophy to his faith and often participated in debates with adversarial groups in public forums. As an eloquent speaker and talented writer, Augustine was able to successfully and systematically break down the logic behind many groups that claimed to possess the ultimate truth and path to God. The primary groups that Augustine took issue with were the Donatists, the Pelagians, the Arians, and the Manicheans. Not only were there many adversarial groups during Augustine's life, but the beloved Roman Empire that had become for the most part Christianized, was showing her first signs of vulnerability with the sack of Rome by Alaric the Visigoth on August 24, 410. All of the controversies coupled with the vulnerability of a once impenetrable empire made Augustine's contributions to our Christian faith both timeless and integral.

Augustine was not always a Godly man. Writing about his own experiences in his *Confessions*, Augustine talks about his life as a boy, a young man, and finally a religious elite. He was born to a pagan father and Christian mother. His mother Monica, a saint herself, played an important role in the life of Augustine as a patient and loving mother always praying and hoping that someday Augustine would change his ways and come into the church. Augustine was a typical ornery young man. Reflecting on his youth, Augustine shares with his readers that he stole. For Augustine a thief was not to gain something he did not have. Instead it was stealing for stealing's sake. He comments that there was some repentment generated by sharing guilt with others." (*Confessions*, II.viii) Augustine as a boy admits he had the mindset to, "inflict loss on someone without any motive on (his) part or personal gain." (*Confessions*, II.ix) In hindsight, Augustine writes that as a young man, he was sick and that the physician that could heal him was Christ, "So my soul was in rotten health. In an ulcerous condition it thrust itself to outward things, miserable to be scratched by contact with the world of senses." (*Confessions*, III.i)

Growing into a man, Augustine's troubles did not end. It was no secret that for fifteen years, he lived with his mistress with whom they had a child together. Augustine was spiritually confused as well, joining the cult of the Manicheans. The Manicheans believed that the physical creation was evil. The Manicheans consisted of two classes, the Hearers, of whom Augustine was a part of, and the Elect, which were the ultimate goal of the Manicheans, living an extremely ascetic life. The Manicheans denied any belief in the Old Testament because in essence it was the work of creation, something they despised. With this said, the Manicheans considered themselves in most rites, Christian. The Manicheans understood Jesus as a "quasi-divine redeemer" who was not physically born of a woman or killed on a cross, rather these events were symbolic. (*Augustine: A Brief Introduction*, Chadwick, 13) Being very intelligent, Augustine after several years in the sect became dissatisfied with some of its philosophy and conclusions that seemed illogical to him. Augustine's primary problem was that the good "the light" was very much overshadowed by evil "the dark." He asked himself how anyone would worship a deity so weak and vulnerable as "the light" seemed to be. (*Augustine: A Brief Introduction*, Chadwick, 15) His faith in the Manichean tradition was completely annulled when he brought these issues before the supreme teachers of the Manicheans named Faustus. Through his correspondence with Faustus and his inability to directly address his concerns, Augustine dissolved himself of the Manicheans.

It was about this time in his life that Augustine met Ambrose a bishop, while teaching rhetoric in the town of Milan. Ambrose, an intellectual, challenged Augustine to think about a true faith in Christ. Through Ambrose's preaching and teaching, Augustine's "conviction grew through the knotty problems and clever calumnies which those deceivers (the Manicheans) of ours had devised against the divine books could be removed." (*Confessions*, VI.iii.4) Augustine agonized over conversion. He wondered if he could follow the rigors of living a fully fledged Christian life. Finally, Augustine's conversion came while weeping in a garden after deep self examination. Augustine asked himself in agony, "How long, O Lord?" As Augustine was saying these words, he heard a voice from a nearby house saying to him over and over again, "Pick up a book and read." He took these words to mean that he needed to pick up the book he had just left, which happened to be the letter of Paul to the Romans. He opened the book randomly and laid his eyes immediately on the passage that read, "Not in riots and drunken parties, not in quarrels and indecencies, not in strife and rivalry, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh in its lusts." (Romans 13:13) (*Confessions*, VIII.xxi.29) This deeply struck a man who had lived life in the flesh. Due to this experience, Augustine immediately turned from his carnal ways and converted wholeheartedly to Christianity.

After conversion, Augustine came to be bishop of Hippo and wrote many treatises and books that today are still considered masterpieces. A few of these are, *De Trinitate (On The Trinity)*, *De Civitate Dei (The City of God)*, *The Confessions*, *The Excellence of Marriage*, and *On Christian Teaching*.