

## 25. AUGUSTINE: THE BRAVE WARRIOR IN GOD'S CHURCH.



**A**ugustine had to bury his mother, Monica, while travelling to Africa. Now that his mother had passed away, Augustine returned to Rome. He had lost his desire to go back to Africa. Augustine lived in Rome for one year. Then he decided to go to Africa after all, and, together with his son, he

lived quietly on his country estate at Carthage. While there, you may be sure he often thought of his God-fearing mother. Then his son also died. Now Augustine is alone in the world. Ah, perhaps he was thinking of quietly spending the rest of his life on his estate. But God had other plans for him. The Lord wanted to use him in His church as a means for many to come to faith.

### THE BISHOP OF HIPPO

In 391, the church appointed Augustine as a presbyter (or elder) in the small city of Hippo. Hippo was situated west of the large city of Carthage, almost at the border of the Roman empire in Africa. Five years later, he became a bishop and remained a bishop till he died. He served the church at Hippo for thirty-five years as



pastor and teacher. For thirty-five years, he laboured zealously in the church of God. He did not have an easy, quiet life. He stood at the forefront of many conflicts, and those conflicts were severe. Conflict?

Had war broken out?

It was not a physical war with weapons but a spiritual battle. It was warfare against all kinds of errors that had crept into the church.

Such spiritual warfare is often fiercer than a war with weapons.

When Augustine became the bishop of Hippo in 396, most of the residents there belonged to the Donatists.

The Donatists already existed during the reign of Constantine the Great. They taught that people belonging to the church had to be completely holy.

Many Christians sacrificed to the idols to escape martyrdom when the persecutions raged. They were the apostates. But when the persecutions abated, many apostates returned to Christianity again. Then they had to confess their sins.

But the Donatists said:

"Oh, no, apostates can't come back just like that! They must be baptised again if they truly want to return and mean it." They left angrily and formed a separate group when they could not get their way.

They said:

"Now we are the true church; we are holy and much better than the other Christians. We don't allow sin to be dealt with so easily! Just imagine! We are stricter and take things more seriously than the others."

Constantine the Great had persecuted them. He had forced them to give up their churches. If they refused, the soldiers came and took their churches from them by force. Sometimes the soldiers killed and wounded some of the Donatists.

During the reign of Emperor Julian, the Apostate, they received all their churches back again. Julian did this on purpose. The more divisions within the church, the better he liked it. When the Donatists received their churches back, they first thoroughly cleaned everything. They even washed the stones and bricks with water because, according to them, everything had become polluted. What nonsense that was!

The Donatists removed pews, chairs and other furniture from the churches and smashed them to pieces. They made all new furniture! They did not want to use the other furnishings again because the other Christians had used them!

At the time of Augustine, most of the residents of Hippo had become Donatists. These Donatists were so spiteful that a Donatist baker would not even bake bread for those who were not Donatists! So it's not surprising that Augustine began to contend with them. The elect are indeed holy through Christ, but it is equally true that

God's children remain sinful people who need God's grace at all times. Besides, Christ has compared the church with a field where you can find tares and wheat growing together. That means there are converted and unconverted people in the church. On earth, they live alongside each other until the day of judgment. Then God will harvest the wheat and burn the tares with unquenchable fire. Then an eternal separation occurs between those who fear God and those who don't.

### AUGUSTINE AND THE DONATISTS

Yet Augustine did not immediately take drastic and severe action against the Donatists. He tried to speak calmly with them, hoping they would see their error. However, it did not help. On the contrary, they tried to murder Augustine.

One day, Augustine went on a journey. Some Donatists were lying in wait for him along the road to kill him. But the Lord was in control and



Augustine debating the Donatist. Painter Charles-André van Loo. Wikipedia



caused Augustine to travel a different route than usual. And so, the Donatist's attempt on his life was a complete failure. After that, Augustine worked against them more rigorously and sternly. He called a synod to discuss the Donatist problem. The synod decided to condemn their doctrine. When that did not change anything, the emperor interfered. He deprived them of their churches for the second time. They were not even allowed to meet, and whoever dared to transgress that imperial command was threatened with the punishment of death. Then many Donatists, sometimes entire churches at a time, returned to the Christian churches they had so fiercely opposed, which was a good thing.

Augustine was a means in God's hand to break the power of the Donatists. Finally, they disappeared from history altogether.

### AUGUSTINE AND PELAGIUS

The conflict with the Donatists had only just been brought to a good end when an even more dangerous error crept into the church.

Around 400, a man came to Rome who preached weird things. That man's name was *Pelagius*.

Initially, he lived in England but later moved to Rome. There he preached his heresies wherever he could.

We read in *the Bible* that all men are dead in sin. By nature, all men are subject to the threefold death.

But *Pelagius* taught something completely different. *He* said:

"All men are born without sin."

*The Bible* teaches us that the sin of Adam gave all humanity a sinful nature. We call this 'original sin'.

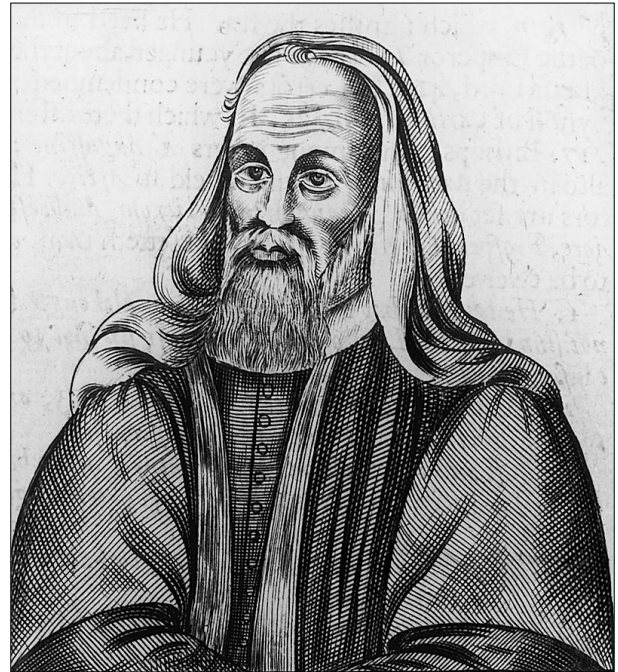
*Pelagius* said:

"No, that is not true. Every person is born without sin, so also without original sin."

*The Bible* teaches us that God said:

"On the day that you eat of it, you shall surely die." (Gen 2: 17)

So, death is the result of sin. If Adam and Eve had not fallen into sin, man would have lived forever.



*Pelagius, 354-418. Wikipedia*

But through sin, death has come into the world.

*Pelagius* said:

"That's not true either. When God created man, He created man to die. Only eternal death, the punishment of hell, is a result of sin."

*The Bible* teaches us that sin has corrupted all men. We cannot and don't want to do anything but sin.

*Pelagius* said:

"I'm saying it's different; man is born *without* sin, and now he can *choose* to either sin or not."

*The Bible* teaches us that the Lord Jesus came to bear the wrath of God against sin. Jesus came to obtain salvation for His people with His suffering and death. The Saviour made the perfect payment for His people when He poured out His life's blood for them.

*Pelagius* said:

"Oh, no, that's not true. The Lord Jesus only came to set a *good example*. Just like a teacher in school neatly writes an example on the board, which the children must copy neatly, the Lord Jesus has only set a good example, and now the people must follow His good example. They must and can do this, and whoever follows Jesus' good example *can* earn his own salvation."

*The Bible* teaches us that only God's grace can save us from eternal destruction. "By grace you are saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God." Eph. 2:8.

*Pelagius* said:

"No way, we do not need the grace of God. We are perfectly able to earn our salvation ourselves." The doctrine of Pelagius opposed the teaching of the Bible.

Pelagius was an evil, wicked man. But no one believed him, did they? Alas, yes.

Many people said:

"Pelagius is right!"

Thousands and thousands of people believed everything Pelagius taught. Many became followers of Pelagius. Those followers were called 'Pelagians'. Soon, even Pelagian bishops preached Pelagius' errors daily to their congregations. That was terrible, for they forever deceived thousands of people.

Now Augustine went to battle with those Pelagians. He proved from Scripture that the Pelagians were wrong and disagreed with the Bible. Augustine did everything possible to convince those erring people of their dangerous doctrine. He talked for hours with them and wrote books in which he defended the truth.

He seriously warned the people against Pelagius. But the Pelagians would not listen to him. They called him names and opposed him wherever they could.

There were disruptions and divisions everywhere. Hatred and envy grew as the spiritual conflict raged.

Good neighbours became bitter enemies.



*Augustine of Hippo. Wikipedia*

People who had been faithful friends for many years called each other nasty names and no longer wanted anything to do with each other. Brothers and sisters did not want to see each other anymore. There was hatred and division in the families. A husband was against his wife, parents against their children and the reverse. How sad! It was just like in the days of Arius. Oh, the devil has tried everything he could to destroy the church of God! Will God's church perish through internal strife and divisions?

No! Through all this runs the golden thread of God's ruling hand.

God Himself preserved His church.

God Himself watched over His church for its benefit. These sad divisions had to work together for good, even though it sometimes looked hopeless.

In times of great confusion, the Lord gives special people an extra measure of grace and wisdom to guide His flock. In the days of Arius, the Lord raised and used Athanasius as a means in God's hand to make the true doctrine triumph. Now Augustine is the man who tirelessly combats the Pelagians. Thankfully, many bishops supported Augustine in his severe battle to uphold the truth.

They called many synods. The bishops assembled and discussed the false doctrines. Thankfully they condemned Pelagius' teachings at those synods.

But the Pelagians did not give up.

They just kept teaching their wicked, false doctrines.

Finally, the major synod at Carthage in the year 418 condemned Pelagius once and for all.

They excommunicated Pelagius and removed the bishops who followed his teachings.

Augustine came out of that conflict victoriously. No, I must say it differently. This battle was not about man's honour. *God's* honour was at stake! And God made sure His church came out of that conflict victoriously. Although battered, God did not allow His church to be destroyed.

### **THE SEMI- PELAGIANS**

But that's not the end of the story! There was a third group of people I must tell you about. We

may not ignore them because their position is significant. During that fierce struggle between Pelagius and Augustine, a third group of people tried to reconcile them with each other. But this was impossible. Pelagius taught the lie, and Augustine fought for the truth. Pelagius taught, "After a man is born, he is still good, without sin." Augustine taught: "Man is dead in sin before birth."

There is no middle road here. Yet that third group attempted to make a middle road. They said: "Pelagius is wrong, but Augustine is also wrong. Man is not good; man is not dead, but he is sick when born." They did not mean sick in body but sick in soul. Those people we call 'Semi-Pelagians'. That means 'half Pelagian'. These Semi-Pelagians were wrong, too. Half a truth *is* not truth but a lie.

Only God's Word speaks the truth, which clearly teaches us that man is not good and not sick but *dead* in sin and trespasses. Through the terrible fall in Paradise, man has wilfully and voluntarily plunged himself into that threefold state of death. The doctrine of the Semi-Pelagians has been accepted and believed by thousands and tens of thousands. That false doctrine has finally overpowered the church. The Roman Catholics still teach that semi-Pelagian doctrine. Has the devil triumphed after all? No, that is impossible. I will tell you more about this later.

Augustine also wrote books against paganism. The title of one of his most important and well-known works is: "The City of God." We can learn much from reading it!

## THE VANDALS

Then dark days dawned for North Africa. A powerful and cruel people called The Vandals invaded France. They came from Germany and conquered almost all of France. The Roman legions could not repulse them. Those Vandals crossed the Pyrenees and conquered Spain.

Despite all these conquests, the Vandals were not yet satisfied. With an army of 80,000 soldiers,

they crossed over to North Africa and besieged Hippo. Hippo defended itself bravely. It took them over a year to conquer Hippo. While the fierce struggle raged on and around the walls of Hippo, and the furious Vandals, shouting and screaming, stormed the walls, while the wounded groaned and many died, the aged grey Augustine was at home, lying on his deathbed. God had chosen this time to take His child and servant home. For Augustine, the battle was over. He entered into eternal glory. While a life-and-death struggle raged on the walls of his hometown, Augustine took no notice of it and was not troubled by it. Quietly and calmly, he breathed his last.

The Vandals finally conquered and plundered the city of Hippo. But they could not harm Augustine.

Not only the city of Hippo but also Carthage was conquered and destroyed. The province's inhabitants suffered terribly, but the Lord had kept Augustine from all that misery.

As a mother takes her child home to shelter it from a heavy thunderstorm, God took His child Augustine to heaven before the Vandals destroyed everything.

In heaven, he and his mother may praise and glorify God forever. How wonderful are God's ways!



*Vandal. Painted by Lucas de Heere. Wikipedia*



## QUESTIONS

1. Define the term 'presbyter.'
2. Where is Hippo located?
3. What did the Donatists teach?
4. How did the Donatists treat those who had returned to Christianity after the persecutions?
5. Why did Julian tolerate the Donatists?
6. Why did the Donatists cleanse their churches?
7. Is the church holy? Explain.
8. List the methods Augustine used to combat the Donatist error.
9. What ruling did the synod make regarding the Donatist error?
10. What became of the Donatists?
11. List five errors of Pelagius.
12. How did Augustine, guided by the Holy Spirit, defend the truth?
13. How did the synod view Pelagius and his errors?
14. What is Semi-Pelagianism? What are its errors?

15. What church today still teaches Semi-Pelagian errors?
16. How can this doctrine be proven wrong based on God's Word?

## FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Under what conditions may a person be re-baptised?
2. Name one attempt in the last five hundred years to establish a church of believers only. Was it successful? Why or why not?
3. Explain our ecclesiastical form of church government (synod, classis, consistory)
4. John Locke, a famous philosopher of the seventeenth century, believed that a child is born as a 'tabula rasa,' a blank piece of paper. What a child becomes is entirely the result of his experiences. How is this view related to the ideas of Pelagius?
5. What effect would such beliefs have on a child's education?



*Vandals invading Rome — painting by Karl Bryullov*