

Church History



Review

- What is the ***earliest*** known list that identifies ***all*** 27 books in our NT as ***canonical*** and when was it written?
 - The *39th Festal Letter* of Athanasius written in AD 367
- The Fourth Century Church recognized the inspiration and infallibility of both the Old and New Testament scriptures.
- Unfortunately, ***in addition*** to recognizing the divine authority of the scriptures, many early church fathers ***also*** gave an alarmingly significant amount of weight to what other source of teaching?
 - “***unwritten*** traditions” that they claimed had been “handed down” by the apostles
- Give some of the supposed “unwritten traditions” that we saw last week in the citation that I gave from Basil of Caesarea.
 - *to make the sign of the cross*
 - *turning to the east in prayer*
 - *immersing people three times in baptism*

Review

- In the **4th century**, an complex ***multiple*** church government began to form. No longer were all bishops viewed as equals. Those of greater importance came to be called archbishops.
- What was one of the major factors that from the 4th century on served to determine the importance of a bishop?
 - The size and importance of the city that he was bishop over.
- By the 5th century, a few bishops were viewed as being even ***more*** powerful than the archbishops, due to the outstanding spiritual or political importance of their cities and/or churches. What were these bishops called?
 - “Patriarchs” or, in the case of Rome “papa” or “pope”
- Give some examples of changes that took place in church worship in the 4th century.
 - emphasis on liturgy – a fixed, written form of worship
 - wearing special vestments
 - use of incense
 - the carrying of lights (lamps, candles, tapers)
- Name some practices that crept into the church in the 4th century that, either ***were*** idolatrous or, over time, ***led*** to idolatry.
 - Revering the “relics” of saints
 - praying to saints (who had died)
 - adorning of churches with icons

Baptism in the Early Church

A photograph of a large, rectangular, stone baptismal font built into a stone wall. The font is made of light-colored stone and has a rough, textured surface. It is set into a larger stone wall, which appears to be part of a larger structure like a church or cathedral. The lighting is natural, highlighting the texture of the stone.

*Description of a 4th Century Baptismal Ceremony

- Cyril of Jerusalem (AD 313 – 386) tells us that the catechumens (candidates for baptism) gathered in the vestibule (waiting area) of the baptistery, were to turn the west, and publicly renounced “Satan, his works, his pomp and his service”.
- Then, turning to the east, they professed their faith in the Trinity.
- After this the catechumens were led into the baptistery, where they took off their clothes and were anointed with oil which had first been exorcised.
- Then, one by one, they were immersed three times in the baptismal pool; this threefold or triple immersion signified their faith in each of the three persons of the Trinity, and Christ’s three-day slumber in the tomb.

*Description of a 4th Century Baptismal Ceremony

- They were then anointed with oil again, on the forehead, ears, nostrils and breast, in a ceremony called chrismation (from *chrisma*, the Greek word for “anointing”).
- Chrismation symbolized the gift of the Holy Spirit.
- Finally, the newly baptized people were clothed in white garments, given lighted tapers, and led into the main part of the church where they took part in holy communion for the first time.
- In the Western churches, they were also given milk and honey just before communion, to symbolize their entrance into the heavenly promised land.
- Catechumens throughout the Empire were all baptized at the same time of year: Easter and Pentecost.

*4th Century Teaching on Baptism

- Cyril's Lectures give us a full account of how the Catholic Church had, by the 4th century, come to understand the meaning of baptism.
- Cyril called baptism "the bath of regeneration" and taught his catechumens that it had three main effects.
 - First, it washed away the guilt of all sins committed prior to baptism.
 - Second, it sanctified the baptized person, by conferring on him spiritual union with Christ in His death and resurrection, the gift of the Spirit, and adoption as God's child.
 - Third, it impressed a "seal" or permanent mark on the soul, by virtue of which the baptized person was set apart as the Holy Spirit's temple.
- Cyril's doctrine of baptism was the view held by all Christians in the 4th century, and indeed from the 150s onward.

*4th Century Teaching on Baptism

- In assessing this patristic doctrine of “baptismal regeneration”, modern readers should keep in mind:
 1. Cyril and other fathers insisted that it was not the water of baptism that bestowed these spiritual benefits, but the Holy Spirit, who worked inwardly in the soul at the same time that the water outwardly washed the body.

*4th Century Teaching on Baptism

- In assessing this patristic doctrine of “baptismal regeneration”, modern readers should keep in mind:
 2. Believers’ baptism was the norm of baptismal practice in the 4th century. Even though there is clear evidence that infant baptism was practiced (and probably had been since the 2nd century), most Christian parents would still not baptize their children, precisely ***because*** they linked baptism with the washing away of sin. For example, Monica, the mother of the great theologian Augustine of Hippo (354-430), did not have Augustine baptized in infancy, because she did not want him to lose the grace of baptism by all the sins she felt sure he would commit as a child and teenager.

*4th Century Teaching on Baptism

- In assessing this patristic doctrine of “baptismal regeneration”, modern readers should keep in mind:
 3. Owing to this widespread belief that baptism could deal only with sins committed before a person was baptized, even adult converts often delayed their baptism till the last possible moment, when they were ill and dying. The classic example of this was the emperor Constantine the Great, who was baptized only in his last moments of life.

*4th Century Teaching on Baptism

- In assessing this patristic doctrine of “baptismal regeneration”, modern readers should keep in mind:
 4. If a catechumen died before being baptized, some of the greatest of the early Church fathers taught that he or she was saved without baptism.
 - When the godly young Western emperor Valentinian II (383-92) was murdered in AD 392 before his baptism, Ambrose of Milan comforted Valentinian's two sisters with the assurance that their brother's soul had gone to be with Christ. *“It was enough that he desired baptism,”* Ambrose said. *“His sincere desire for baptism was just as effective as baptism itself.”*
 - Augustine taught the same: *“A person is baptized invisibly, when his failure to be baptized in water was owing to an unavoidable death rather than contempt for Christianity.”*

*4th Century Teaching on Baptism

- In assessing this patristic doctrine of “baptismal regeneration”, modern readers should keep in mind:
 5. The fathers saw acceptance of the true faith as necessary if baptism was to be effective. The mere physical act of baptism, without true faith, was empty of value. Baptism given by heretics, e.g. Manichees and Arians, was therefore regarded by the early Church fathers as spiritually worthless; heretics performed the outward act of baptism, but their faith was not in the true gospel, and so their baptism conferred no spiritual benefit.

Early Church Teaching on the Atonement



*Early Church Teaching on the Atonement

- Critical scholars, led by the classic work of the neo-orthodox, Lutheran theologian Gustaf Aulén (1879-1977), have long argued that the earliest Christians did not believe that Christ died as a substitute for sinners.
- If Aulén is correct, then when did the substitutionary view of the atonement arise? The typical critical approach says that it was not until the Middle Ages, when Anselm wrote *Cur Deus Homo (Why the God-Man?)*, that Christians began to believe Christ died in place of sinners.
- No doubt these sorts of scholarly arguments can explain why alternative theories of the atonement have gained popularity in recent years, while the substitutionary view continues to be vilified as un-Christian.
- Rob Bell does precisely this in his book *Love Wins*, where he roundly rejects the substitutionary view in favor of other options.

*Early Church Teaching on the Atonement

- But is it really true that the substitutionary view of the atonement was not found before the Middle Ages?
- Not at all. Such a claim can be readily refuted merely by examining the writings of the New Testament itself—particularly the letters of Paul.
- Furthermore, we have already seen that key elements of the substitutionary view of atonement were held by some of the earliest Christian writers.
- One example is the author of the *Epistle to Diognetus*, written by one of the Apostolic Fathers in the ***early second century***.

*Early Church Teaching on the Atonement

- Below are some excerpts from the *Epistle to Diognetus* that affirm key aspects of substitutionary atonement:
 - **Seriousness of Sin** – *And when we had demonstrated that we were powerless to enter the kingdom of God on our own, we were enabled to do so by the power of God. For our unrighteous way of life came to fruition and it became perfectly clear that we could expect only punishment and death as our ultimate reward.* (9.1-2)
 - **Grace and Love of God** – *But then, when the time arrived that God planned to reveal at last his goodness and power (Oh the supreme beneficence and love of God!), he did not hate us, destroy us, or hold a grudge against us.* (9.2)
 - **Christ Bore Our Sins on Himself** – *But [God] was patient, he bore with us, and out of pity for us took our sins upon himself. He gave up his own Son as a ransom for us, the holy one for the lawless, the innocent one for the wicked, the righteous one for the unrighteous, the imperishable one for the perishable, the immortal one for the mortal.* (9.2)

*Early Church Teaching on the Atonement

- Subsequent to the Apostolic Fathers, early church teaching on the atonement becomes less prominent and, at times, intermixed or replaced by other ideas.
- **The Second Century Apologists** contain very little on the subject that is of importance. In so far as Christ is represented as a Redeemer, it is usually as a Redeemer from the power of the devil.
- **Irenaeus** (AD 130-202) agrees with the Second Century Apologists in seeing man as enslaved by the powers of darkness, and looks upon redemption partly as deliverance from the power of Satan, though he does not look upon it as a satisfaction due **to** Satan. His idea is rather that the death of Christ satisfied the justice of God and thus liberates man.

*Early Church Teaching on the Atonement

- In the **Alexandrian School** we find a number of ideas about the atonement:
 - **Clement of Alexandria** in one of his *minor* works represents the death of Christ as a payment of man's debt and as a ransom; but in his *main* works he gives more prominence to the thought that Christ as Teacher saves men by endowing them with true knowledge and inspiring them to a life of love and true righteousness!
 - **Origen** presents several different views without really explaining how they all fit together:
 - Christ saves by deifying human nature through the incarnation;
 - By giving the supreme example of self-sacrifice, thus inspiring others to a similar sacrifice;
 - By laying down his life as a sacrifice that takes away guilt by the payment of a penalty or the offering of an atonement;
 - By redeeming men from the power of Satan.

*Early Church Teaching on the Atonement

- Origen in his teaching that Christ redeemed men from the power of Satan, introduces a new idea, namely that Satan was ***deceived*** in the transaction:
 - Christ offered Himself as a ransom to ***Satan***
 - Satan accepted the ransom without realizing that he would not be able to retain his hold on Christ because of the latter's divine power and holiness.
 - Satan swallowed the bait of Christ's humanity, and was caught on the hook of His divinity.
 - Thus the souls of all men - even of those in hades - were set free from the power of Satan.
- The Bible does speak of Christ's death as a "ransom" (Mat. 20:28; 1Tim. 2:6; 1Pet. 1:18; Rev. 5:9) but ***not*** as a ransom to ***Satan***.

*Early Church Teaching on the Atonement

- Athanasius wrote the first systematic treatise on the work of the atonement in *De Incarnatione*. This work also contains several different ideas:
 - The Logos became incarnate to restore to man the true knowledge of God, which had been lost by sin.
 - The incarnate Logos is also represented as man's substitute, who pays his debt for him by enduring the penalty of sin.
 - The Logos assumed flesh in order to deify and immortalize it.

*Early Church Teaching on the Atonement

- The **Cappadocian fathers** are the true successors of Athanasius:
 - **Basil** contributed little to the doctrine of the atonement.
 - **Gregory of Nyssa**, is the author of the second important systematic treatment on the work of Christ, the *Great Catechism*, in which the underlying thought is the idea that in the incarnation God joined himself to our nature, in order to free it from sin and death.
 - **Gregory of Nazianzus** repudiates with scorn and indignation the idea of a ransom paid to Satan. But he also rejects the idea that God the Father required a ransom. For the rest he virtually repeats the teachings of Athanasius.

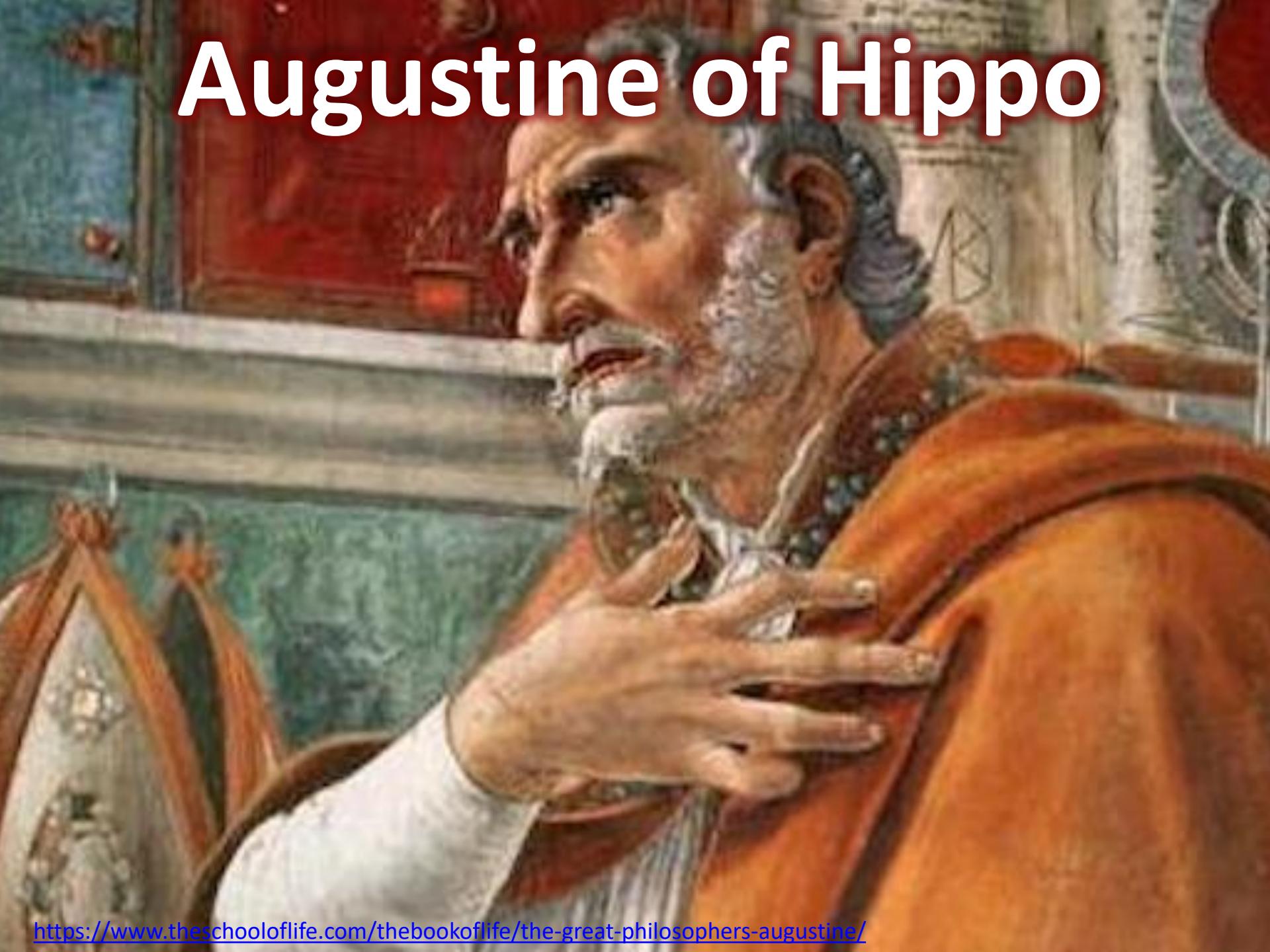
*Early Church Teaching on the Atonement

- **Augustine** comes along at the end of the fourth century and beginning of the fifth.
 - He provides us with an orthodox summary, de-emphasizing those elements in earlier writings that are the most unbiblical, and emphasizing the Pauline concepts of justification, substitution, and forgiveness.
 - But Augustine does not have an in-depth handle on the Greek language (he is reading in the Latin) and so his analysis is not always as accurate or in-depth as we might wish.
- There were further developments in this area in the medieval period with Anselm and Abelard.
- But there is no question that the most biblically based discussion on the subject of the atonement comes post-Reformation.

*Early Church Teaching on the Atonement

- You might ask why. If the atonement is such a central doctrine, why was so little said about it in those early periods of Christian history?
- Primarily because the biblical categories relating to the atonement are most clearly expressed in the Old Covenant and in the book of Hebrews. It wasn't until a Christian risked his life to have a Jew teach him the OT that these things really began to come to light.
- The other reason it became so important to second and third generation reformers is that once the initial battle on justification has been put out there, then they began to dig more deeply into questions about the ***foundations*** of justification, which then takes you to the atonement of Christ.

Augustine of Hippo



VOLUNTEERS ARE LIKE BROWNIES!

B BEST OF THE BEST
R REALLY GENEROUS
O OUTSTANDING
W WONDERFUL
N NATURALLY NICE
I INVALUABLE TO HOPE
E EXCELLENT
S SWEET



Class Discussion Time



*Class Discussion Time

- By the fourth century, the early church had clearly added a number of elements to the baptismal ceremony that are not commanded in scripture. Do you see that as a problem?
- Is it a problem to view baptism as necessary to salvation? Why or why not?
- In the early church, there seems to be a very strong emphasis on the role of Satan in hindering our access to and/or our faithfulness to God. Do the scriptures support such an idea? Do you think the modern church gives adequate attention to this topic? Why or why not?
- Do ***you*** have a topic or question that ***you*** would like to see us to discuss?