

THE SOTERIOLOGICAL IMPACT OF AUGUSTINE’S CHANGE FROM PREMILLENNIALISM TO AMILLENNIALISM: PART ONE

DAVID R. ANDERSON

Pastor

Faith Community Church
The Woodlands, Texas

I. INTRODUCTION

In a recent article¹ we introduced the concept of “Spread Sheet Theology” by suggesting that this might be an alternate way to describe Systematic Theology. A good system is unified, comprehensive, consistent, and everything “fits.” That means if we make a significant change in one part of the system, it may well affect other parts of the system. We made the claim that Augustine’s choice to do away with premillennial eschatology is a case in point. That is, when Augustine became amillennial, this major change in his eschatology affected other parts of his theology, namely his soteriology. The purpose of this study will be to demonstrate how Augustine’s change to amillennialism still has ripples in soteriology today. In order to do this, we will develop the study in four parts offered in two installments: the Eschatology of Augustine, the Soteriology of Augustine, the Soteriology of John Calvin, and the Soteriology of Today. Admittedly, each of the subtitles could contain volumes. What we are trying to do in this study is to show how Augustine’s change in eschatology affected not only his soteriology, but the soteriology of Western Christianity from the Medieval Period until today.

Though pretribulation, premillennial eschatology is often criticized as a “recent” development in theology, such is simply not the case. That chiliasm was the norm in eschatology up until roughly A.D. 400 is no

¹David R. Anderson, “Regeneration: A Crux Interpretum” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* (Autumn 2000): 43-65.

debate among church historians.² So we can safely say the church fathers were premillennial. But were they pretribulational?

The primary defense for a pretribulational approach to the rapture is the early church's view of imminency.³ If one is premillennial and believes in a rapture such as that described in 1 Thessalonians 4, then the only chronological option for this rapture which is consistent with imminency is a rapture before the beginning of the Tribulation.⁴ Thus, a stronger argument can be made for the early Fathers being

² In the *Dialogue with Trypho*, 7 and 8, Justin Martyr (d. 165) explains: "I and every other completely orthodox Christian feel certain that there will be a resurrection of the flesh, followed by a thousand years in the rebuilt, embellished, and enlarged city of Jerusalem, as was announced by the Prophets Ezechiel, Isaias and the others" (italics mine).

The great apologist Irenaeus of Lyons (d. 200) in his anti-Gnostic work, *Adversus haereses*, gives evidence of his belief in a Tribulation which would precede Christ's millennial reign (V, 28, 3):

For in as many days as this world was made, in so many thousand years shall it be concluded. . . . For the day of the Lord is as a thousand years. . . . [When this Antichrist shall have devastated all things in this world, he will reign for three years and six months, and sit in the temple at Jerusalem; and then the Lord will come from heaven in the clouds, in the glory of the Father, sending this man and those who are following him into the lake of fire; but bringing in for the righteous the times of the kingdom, that is, the rest, the hallowed seventh day.

Interestingly, Irenaeus was known as the "man of Tradition" because of his teaching on the Apostolic Tradition, and he claimed to teach only what he had heard as having been proclaimed from the beginning.

³ A belief in imminency is obvious from the *Didachè*: "Watch over your life; your lamps must not go out, nor your loins be ungirded; on the contrary, be ready. You do not know the hour in which Our Lord is coming." And Clement (*I Clement*, XXIII) exhorts the Corinthians: "Take a vine: first it drops its leaves; then a shoot comes, then a leaf, then a flower, after that the sour fruit, then the fully ripe grapes. You see that in a short time the fruit of the tree reaches maturity. In truth his will shall be fulfilled quickly and suddenly. . . . He shall come quickly and not linger, and the Lord will come suddenly to his temple. . . ."

⁴ As the quote from Irenaeus above demonstrates, those who believed in a literal Millennium on earth also believed in a literal Tribulation, which would immediately precede this Millennium, as described by Daniel and Revelation. If the rapture were to occur any time during this Tribulation, then any concept of

pretribulational and premillennial than any other eschatological position with regard to Christ's Parousia. With the notable exception of Origen of Alexandria, this was the prevailing approach to eschatology when Augustine came on the scene.

II. AUGUSTINE'S ESCHATOLOGY

It may shock some to realize that Augustine was not only premillennial⁵ in his early eschatology, but he was also dispensational. Of course, if we understand Spread Sheet Theology and Dispensationalism as a system (spread sheet) of theology, this should not be a surprise. A literal Millennium on earth is of the essence of dispensational theology. Augustine held to a traditional seven-age (dispensational) model which coordinated periods in biblical history with humanity's spiritual progress toward redemption. The initial five stages correlated to OT history and were demarcated by Adam, Noah, Abraham, David, and the Exile.⁶ The two NT dispensations, according to Augustine and practically all dispensationalists, were the Church Age and the Millennial Kingdom, "the Sabbath Rest" of the saints on earth.⁷

But three factors converged in northern Africa which influenced Augustine to take a new approach to the Millennium. The first was his revulsion over the bacchanal celebrations of the Donatists. The Roman Catholics were the intruders in North Africa, the "Bible Belt" of the Mediterranean world. They were the minority right up through the fourth century. But the Donatist Church, which separated from Rome over

imminency associated with Christ's Second Coming would be destroyed, since both Daniel and Revelation tell us how many days are in the Tribulation. If the rapture took place during the Tribulation, one could easily calculate the exact day of His Coming. But this would contradict Christ's statement that no one knows the day or the hour except His Father.

⁵ Augustine, *City of God*, 20.7,1; see also G. Folliet, "La typologie du sabbat chez Saint Augustin. Son interprétation millénariste entre 386 et 400," *REAug* 2 (1956): 371-90.

⁶ Though dispensationalists disagree somewhat on the different administrative periods (economies) in the OT, there is general agreement that a dispensation is a distinguishable economy in God's administration of His redemptive plan for mankind.

⁷ Augustine, *Sermon 259*, 2. See also Paula Fredriksen, "Apocalypse and Redemption in Early Christianity," *Vigiliae Christianae* 45 (1991): 163.

the issue of rebaptism of the *traditores* who succumbed to the pressure from Diocletian to burn their holy books, had the upper hand. And they were fervent. The Donatists were the “church of the martyrs,” the faithful who would not compromise no matter how fierce the persecution. They honored their dead by burying them in wet plaster so as to preserve every detail of the body’s outline—all the better to anticipate the resurrection of said body to reign in the physical Millennium to come.

But it was the drunken feasts celebrated by the “cult of the dead” which offended Augustine. He associated this kind of behavior with the Jewish apocalyptic emphasis on grand feasts of celebration during the kingdom of the saints on earth. His platonic leanings influenced him to view such materialistic gorging with a jaundiced eye. Augustine’s revulsion at his own pre-Christian debauchery left him with an ascetic bent. For example, married men who indulged in sexual pleasure after procreation were guilty of venial sins.⁸ For Augustine this revelry for the dead was *carnalis ingurgitatio*. Through Plato’s eyes he understood the material flesh to be flawed, imperfect, defective—especially when compared to the spiritual world with its perfect forms and ideals. The human spirit is tortured in its carnal prison; it longs to be set free. The pilgrim can hasten its release by fleshly self-denial. Therefore, along with his growing disdain for the carnal *laetitia* (joy) of the saints was an increasing desire to understand the Millennium in a spiritual instead of a material light.

A second factor which frustrated the Bishop of Hippo was the growing excitement of millenarians as they saw A.D. 500 approaching. The seven days of creation from Genesis 1 were used as figures for many concepts, including the “cosmic week.”⁹ The seven days of creation were combined with Ps 90:4 and 2 Pet 3:8 (a day is with the Lord as a thousand years and a thousand years as a day) and the thousand years of Revelation 20 to establish the ages of the world. Just as the Lord had created the earth in six days and rested on the seventh, so the world would exist for six ages of one thousand years each, but would find rest during the seventh age of a thousand years when Christ returned to rule from Jerusalem. Therefore, one could figure out when Christ would return simply by figuring out the age of mankind.

⁸ Augustine, *On Marriage and Concupiscence*, 1.3.

⁹ J. Daniélou, “La typologie millenariste de la semaine dans le christianisme primitif,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 2 (1948):1-16.

Hippolytus and Julius Africanus (early third century) calculated that Jesus was born in the 5,500th year since creation. Obviously, then, He would return to set up His Kingdom in A.D. 500. This date did not stir up the readers in the days of Julius and Hippolytus, but as A.D. 400 rolled around, anticipation of the coming Millennium added to the ardor and excitement of the Donatists in their celebrations. Augustine's anti-materialism motivated him to deflate this millennial balloon of material emphasis. He could do this if he could use the Scriptures to prove that the Millennium was spiritual instead of physical, and if he could discredit the "cosmic week" chronology so widely accepted in his day. And this leads us to the third factor which combined with the other two to enable Augustine to erase millenarianism from the main stream of Roman Catholic doctrine. It was the hermeneutics of Tyconius.

Origen of Alexandria is often credited with influencing Augustine to use allegory as a tool to do away with a literal, physical Millennium. This is not the case. It is true, of course, that Origen was a scholar of such immense giftedness and influence that his allegorizing of Scripture became a popular approach to interpretation. But his influence was nothing new when Augustine became a Christian. Rather it was the influence of a lay theologian named Tyconius, who first touched Augustine in the 390s. According to Paula Fredriksen,

... it is Tyconius who stands at the source of a radical transformation of African—and thus, ultimately, of Latin—theology, and whose reinterpretation of his culture's separatist and millenarian traditions provided the point of departure for what is most brilliant and idiosyncratic in Augustine's own theology. And it is Tyconius, most precisely, whose own reading of John's Apocalypse determined the Western church's exegesis for the next eight hundred years.¹⁰

The primary tool of Tyconius was not allegory; it was typology. He used typology to avoid the ahistoricism of allegory while insisting that the time of the End could not be known. Through the use of the seven rules of Tyconius¹¹ Augustine was able to turn numbers into symbols, to

¹⁰ Fredriksen, 157.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 157-58. Rule 1: *mysticae*—compositional principles encoded within the text of Scripture which obscure or hide its meaning; Rule 2: *de Domini corpore bipertito*—the body of the Lord, the church, is divided between both the good and the wicked; Rule 3: *de promissis et lege*—the Bible contains both

bind Satan in the sixth age of a thousand years rather than the seventh, and to have saints rule with Christ spiritually in the sixth age rather than the seventh. The miracles of the saints proved that they were reigning with Christ in the Church Age, the sixth dispensation. He found the Antichrist, Gog and Magog, and the first resurrection—all in the age in which he lived.

Augustine eschewed any sort of *Heilsgeschichte* (Salvation History) which was linear. For him it was a tragic waste to try to superimpose a time line on God's redemptive plan, if for no other reason than the fact that Christ Himself did not know when it would end. God's medium of salvation was not history, but rather the individual. Individuals will be raised with corporeal bodies, but these bodies will live in the heavens, not in some kingdom on earth. There will be no food, no procreation, no social relations in God's kingdom. Instead, perfected beings in their thirties will stand around gazing at God. What, then, is the seventh age of a thousand years for Augustine? Although the first six ages were indeed historical, the seventh age is the saints themselves: "After this present age God will rest, as it were, on the seventh day; and he will cause us, who are the seventh day, to find our rest in him."¹²

The success of Tyconius and Augustine can be measured by the Roman Catholic commentary tradition, which followed their lead step

law and promise, the former arousing faith in the latter among the saints; Rule 4: *de specie et genere*—simple reference to particular persons and events can convey general truths; Rule 5: *de temporibus*—numbers in Scripture defy calculation because they are elastic with an infinite number of interpretations; Rule 6: *de recapitulatione*—what appears to be sequence may actually be recapitulation; Rule 7: *de diabolo et eius corpore*—references to the devil in Scripture might actually be referring to his unrighteous followers. With these rules Tyconius could assign historical value but obscure the eschatological significance of the millenarian/apocalyptic passages in the Bible. It is easy to see the influence of these rules in Augustine and subsequent eschatology throughout the centuries of church history: 1) "Future figures" like Gog and the Son of Man appear in present time rather than the future; 2) Millenarian references can be recapitulatory rather than sequential (Revelation 20); 3) Persecution does not identify the righteous of the Great Tribulation since the good and wicked coexist in the present church age; 4) Apocalyptic numbers of former significance (1,000; 144,000; 1260 days; 42 months) are stretched any number of ways with vertiginous ease; 5) Realized eschatology.

¹² Augustine, *City of God*, 22.0.5.

by step. By the time the Reformers appear on the stage of history, eschatology was a dead issue. No scholar had avowed millenarianism for centuries. But the influence of Augustine reached far beyond the eschatological. His most profound influence may have been soteriological. But before we can assess his influence in the soteriology of the Roman Catholic Church (RCC), the Reformers and beyond, we must first understand how his eschatological change affected his own soteriology.

III. AUGUSTINE'S SOTERIOLOGY

Two salient features of Augustine's soteriology are standard fair in any text book discussion on this most influential of Church Fathers. His approach to the depravity of man emasculated man's ability to pull himself up by his own bootstraps to the portals of heaven. Without God's grace it would be impossible for anyone to be eternally saved. Total depravity and human ability stood as antipodes in the soteriological debates, but grace stood out as the corollary of depravity. Depravity underscored the exigency of grace. God's grace was man's only hope for eternal salvation. For these Siamese truths both Roman Catholics and Protestants are indebted to Augustine.

In centuries to come the differences would arise from disagreements over grace. How was God's grace to be obtained? Could one deposit of grace open the doors of heaven to a fallen sinner, or were daily deposits throughout one's life required? Could salvific grace be earned, or was it completely unmeritorious? Could venerable saints like the Virgin Mary also dispense God's grace, or was saving grace the proprietary property of Almighty God alone? And so it goes.

Among these discussions on obtaining God's grace it is often pointed out that Augustine's scant knowledge of Greek caused him to misunderstand *dikaioō*, translating it in its present infinitive form, "to make righteous,"¹³ as opposed to the defining truth of the Reformers that this word meant "to declare righteous." The distinction was enough to cause schism in Western Christianity. Whereas the former meaning signified a change of *character*, the latter meaning referred to a change of *standing*. "To make righteous" looked to one's experience in life, but "to declare righteous" looked to the court room of heaven. The

¹³ Augustine, *On the Spirit and the Letter*, 45.

temporal significance of the distinction in meanings was monumental. Augustine saw justification (the making of righteous character) as a life-long effort, where as Luther understood that one could be “declared righteous” in God’s court at a moment in time.

Initially, the forensic view of justification (“to declare righteous”) was not illumination given to Martin Luther. His issue when he tacked his ninety-five theses to the door at Wittenburg was the sale of indulgences. It was his fellow colleague and language teacher, Philip Melancthon, who persuaded Luther of the truth and implications of forensic righteousness some ten years after the Reformation officially began (1517). But when Luther did understand the significance of “court room” justification, he penned a truth perhaps no one since Paul himself clearly understood: *simul iustus et peccator* (just and a sinner at the same time). This apparent contradiction—that one could be declared righteous (justified) in his position or standing before God, but still be sinful in his character and condition in his temporal body—was a truth never comprehended by Augustine. He was convinced that the character of Christ needed to be infused into the character of the sinner from regeneration at water baptism (usually of infants) until death in order for the person to be “made righteous” (justified) enough to enter God’s heaven. Even the vast majority of God’s elect would not pass muster, so they would be consigned to Purgatory until the final vestiges of sin could be eliminated from their character. Only then could they march confidently through heaven’s gates. So, for Augustine justification was a life-long process. In fact, Purgatory was a provision of God for those in whom the process had not been completed. These elements of Augustine’s soteriology have been sifted through by more scholars than we can number.

However, the connection between Augustine’s understanding of justification and his understanding of eschatology has not, to my knowledge, been previously explored. As we have already seen, Augustine’s exposure to the hermeneutics of Tyconius occurred in the early 390s. By A.D. 400 Augustine had already become a variation of what we would call today amillennial (no literal, physical thousand year reign of Christ on earth). He had also set his sights to destroy millenarianism in Western Christianity. Yet the vast majority of his writings occurred post A.D. 400. Almost all of his writings pertaining to soteriology were written after this point. And in the soteriological writings of Augustine, one verse has center stage. This verse is practically the

point of departure for Augustine's understanding of soteriology. It occurs in his writings more times than John 3:16 or Eph 2:8-9 or any verse or passage from Romans 3–8. What verse is this? It is none other than Matt 24:13—"But he who endures to the end shall be saved."

Now in his early writings Augustine understood the meaning of "saved" in the Olivet Discourse to refer to physical salvation. In one of his early sermons he says:

"And except those days should be shortened, there should no flesh be saved; but for the elect's sake those days shall be shortened." . . . If, saith He, the war of the Romans against the city had prevailed further, all the Jews had perished (for by "no flesh" here, He meaneth no Jewish flesh), . . . But whom doth He here mean by the elect? The believers that were shut up in the midst of them. For that Jews may not say that because of the gospel, and the worship of Christ, these ills took place, He showeth, that so far from the believers being the cause, if it had not been for them, all had perished utterly. For if God had permitted the war to be protracted, not so much as a remnant of the Jews had remained, but lest those of them who had become believers should perish together with the unbelieving Jews, He quickly put down the fighting, and gave an end to the war. Therefore He saith, "But for the elect's sake they shall be shortened."¹⁴

Here he equates "saved" with not perishing physically. But in all his writings after the early stage he equates "saved" with eternal, spiritual salvation. There are over 250 such references to persevering unto the end (of one's physical life) in order to be saved (eternally). Here are a couple of references to clarify his thought: "Who could be ordained to eternal life save by the gift of perseverance? And when we read, 'He that shall persevere unto the end shall be saved;' with what salvation but eternal?"¹⁵ In another treatise he reiterates the same thought: "Who could be ordained to eternal life save by the gift of perseverance? And when we read, 'He that shall persevere unto the end shall be saved;' with what salvation but eternal?"¹⁶ No longer does Augustine understand "saved" in this context to refer to physical salvation. Now it is spiritual salvation.

¹⁴ Augustine, *Homily 75*.

¹⁵ Augustine, *On Rebuke and Grace*, 5.10.

¹⁶ Augustine, *On Perseverance*, 4.10.

For Augustine Matt 24:13 becomes the *sine qua non* of eternal salvation. One can genuinely believe, but not be elect: “It is, indeed, to be wondered at, and greatly to be wondered at, that to some of His own children—whom He has regenerated in Christ—to whom He has given faith, hope, and love, God does not give perseverance also . . .”¹⁷ One can be regenerated, but not be elect: “Some are regenerated, but not elect, since they do not persevere; . . .”¹⁸ The only way to validate one’s election was to persevere until the end of his physical life on earth. This was the ultimate sign of the elect:

We, then, call men elected, and Christ’s disciples, and God’s children, because they are to be so called whom, being regenerated, we see to live piously; but they are then truly what they are called if they shall abide in that on account of which they are so called. But if they have not perseverance,—that is, if they continue not in that which they have begun to be,—they are not truly called what they are called and are not; for they are not this in the sight of Him to whom it is known what they are going to be,—that is to say, from good men, bad men.¹⁹

Of course, with this approach to soteriology Augustine did not think anyone could know that he was elect until he died. No matter how righteous and pious a life the believer might be living today, he could always fall away from the faith before he died (1 Cor 10:12). Such a falling away would prove that this former believer was never elect to begin with, and it would also prove that any assurance derived from the righteousness of his former life was false assurance indeed. No one can be certain until death:

Therefore it is uncertain whether any one has received this gift so long as he is still alive. For if he fall before he dies, he is, of course, said not to have persevered; and most truly is it said. How, then, should he be said to have received or to have had perseverance who has not persevered?²⁰

Can the connection between Augustine’s change in eschatology and his soteriology be made? It should be obvious. As a pretribulation,

¹⁷ Augustine, *On Rebuke and Grace*, 5.18.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.17.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.22.

²⁰ Augustine, *On the Gift of Perseverance*, 5.1.

premillennial dispensationalist Augustine would understand the salvation of Matt 24:13 in a physical sense, especially when two previous uses of “the end” (24:3, 6) and an immediately subsequent use (24:14) both refer to “the end of the age,” not the end of one’s life. But when Augustine changed his eschatology, that is, when he negated any literal, physical Millennium on earth, which would be preceded by a time of Tribulation such as the world has never seen nor shall ever see again (Matt 24:21), then his options for understanding Matt 24:13 were narrowed considerably. No longer could “saved” have a physical meaning, and no longer could “the end” mean the end of the age. The only interpretive option open to him was a spiritual one, so he understood the verse to mean only those believers who persevere in their Christian lives until the end of their physical lives will be able to go to heaven (saved).

With this understanding of Matt 24:13 as the driving force behind his soteriology, Augustine also had reason to believe that justification must be a life-long process. No one could know if he were justified until his physical death, since no one could know if he would persevere in the Christian faith and practice until his physical death. Thus, until today members of the RCC have no assurance that they will go to heaven when they die. There is never any knowledge if their life of perseverance is actually good enough to be accepted by God.

One consequence of this approach to soteriology is a life of self-denial and asceticism so as to help ensure that the believer has not been seduced from the straight and narrow by the sirens of this world. Such self-denial then becomes a requirement for eternal salvation. As Augustine said, “Self-denial of all sorts, if one perseveres to the end of his life, will bring salvation.”²¹ If one loves his wife, parents, or children more than Christ, he is not elect.²² To the unbiased observer this kind of “self-denial salvation” is none other than a works approach to eternal life. But no, Augustine solves the apparent contradiction between self-denial and grace by falling back on verses like Phil 2:12-13 to prove that the power to persist comes from God, not man.²³ Hence, perseverance to the end is a product of God’s grace, since He is the one who graciously

²¹ Augustine, *Reply to Faustus the Manichaeon*, 5.9.

²² Augustine, *City of God*, 21.26.

²³ Augustine, *Homily 8; On the Gift of Perseverance*, 33.

gives a baptized, regenerate believer the power and the desire to do His good pleasure.

Of course, Augustine is still left with a conundrum. Why is it that God graciously gives some baptized, regenerate believers the gift of perseverance to the end but does not give it to others? Now there is only one fall back position left in this labyrinth of soteriological sophistry: it is a mystery. When the theologian can transform obvious contradictions into mysteries, one can easily explain the inexplicable, solve the insoluble, and unscrew the inscrutable! No wonder Philip Schaff concludes that the soteriology of Augustine is both gloomy and full of contradictions.²⁴

The point here is that a change in eschatology has effected a change in soteriology. Changing from premillennial to amillennial caused Augustine to reinterpret Matt 24:13. Completely ignoring the three near references to “the end” which undeniably refer to the end of the age (vv. 3, 6, 14), he chose to interpret “the end” as the end of one’s physical life and “saved” as eternal salvation. With this understanding only those baptized, regenerate believers who remained faithful to Christ until the end of their lives were elect. Faulty biblical theology can lead to faulty systematic theology.

But one might say, “So what? Augustine wrote sixteen hundred years ago. He may have influenced the RCC, but the Reformers broke away from the RCC. My legacy is Reformed, not Roman Catholic.” To which we should reply, “Ah, my friend, you do not understand the influence of Augustine upon the Reformed tradition.” In our second installment of this study we will examine how the change in Augustine’s “Spread Sheet” affected the soteriology of John Calvin and the soteriology of modern Christianity.

²⁴ Philip Schaff, *St. Augustin: Confession, Letters, Life and Work*, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 1, *Early Church Fathers*, CD-Rom (Dallas: Galaxie Software, 1999), Prolegomena.