

Augustine's Early Discovery of the Doctrine of God's Election and the Tale of his Conversion in the *Confessiones*

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There is a book entitled *Augustine the Algerian*. The place where he was born in 354, Thagaste, is now called Souk Ahras and is part of modern Algeria. The fact that Aurelius Augustine, the famous Church father, was born an African and worked in North-Africa all of his life appeals to me. The more recent book title, *Augustine the African*, is less anachronistic, but still somewhat romantic. Augustine never went that far south that he crossed the Sahara on a camel, let alone round the Cape of Good Hope on a ship.

But when a Dutchman is honored to be invited to come and teach patristics in South-Africa, it speaks to my heart that the Gospel of Jesus Christ reached the North of this beautiful and terrible continent as early as the second century B.C. I hope to share with my students and colleagues my encounters with Tertullian, Cyprian, Augustine, Arnobius, and Lactantius – to name but the Latin “big five”.

In the Netherlands fresh translations of Church Fathers writings are on the market. Why this interest? First, the realisation that the Christian church is a minority directs our attention to the early centuries when Christianity had to find its way in a non-friendly environment. Secondly, the fragmentation of the Church into many denominations, factions, and groups fosters the longing for catholicity.

1. A difficult doctrine

Why then did I choose the topic of predestination? The idea that God from eternity decided every man's fate, without first consulting us, repels many. He should have given us free choice and should have restored this freedom simply by pardoning us our wrongdoing. God is held accountable for the sad situation of the world. If he predestined our fate, he could easily have prevented our fall.

The doctrine of predestination is part and parcel of the Reformed tradition. In 2018-19 the 400th anniversary of the Synod and Canons of Dort will surely be commemorated.

It is my passion to try to understand how God's revelation in the Scriptures has been received in earlier times and what we hear in listening to the same Word today. We are not the same people as the Christians when the Church was young, yet we share the same Gospel. How can we explain the differences in accents, wording, concepts? It is my passion to keep relating the present to the past, to understand the transformation of our knowledge, and to be prepared to clarify teaching.

For some time I have been trying to do so in particular for the doctrine of election. Karl Barth's focus on Jesus Christ as both the elected and rejected One marks a theological-historical boundary. The question is inescapable even since: what is the place of 'Jesus Christ in the Decree' (to use the title from Richard Muller's book)? The doctrine of predestination, as expressed in the Canons of Dort and the scholastic Reformed tradition, has been challenged and (I think) disintegrated.

On the occasion of this inaugural lecture I wanted to go the roots. If Augustine can be called – with St. Paul – the founding father of this specific teaching of free grace, when and where was this formulated first? During the Arminian controversy the claim was made that the old Augustine taught the doctrine of (double) predestination, but that the young Augustine's

doctrine of grace was to be preferred. The old Augustine is best known for the diptych *De praedestinatione sanctorum* and *De dono perseverantiae* of his old age (428). The question I hope to answer is: **when and how did Augustine begin to teach a doctrine of predestination?**

2. From secondary to primary sources

How to approach the research to find an answer to this question? Where does a theological student in South-Africa go when he/she want to know Augustine's position in the doctrine of predestination? The Afrikaans speaking student may be advised to read WILLIE JONKER, *Uit vrye guns alleen. Oor uitverkiesing en verbond* (1988). The advice is sound, because Jonker provides an excellent overview of the history of this doctrine and of the various contributions from the 20th century. On p. 20-23 the student will read about Augustine and the decisive moments in his writing. As a secondary work in Afrikaans Jonker's book is as invaluable. There is nothing wrong in trusting his authority and integrity as a scholar. It remains, however, a secondary work and is no primary source.

Where do you go if you want to verify his presentation and go deeper into the matter than the three pages of Jonker's book? What are his sources and where do they lead the diligent student who wants to know more about Augustine's thinking on predestination? Jonker's best source is A.D.R. POLMAN's thesis from 1936, written in Dutch. This learned work gives a detailed analysis of the development of Augustine's thinking on predestination ('historisch-genetisch'). For the special phase on which I hope to focus, the student will turn to part 1, chapter 3 on 'the provisional closing [of Augustine's development] in his writing to Simplician'. How does the author present Augustine? With a clear analysis of *Ad Simplicianum* in eight pages, following the numbering of paragraphs, interspersed with quotations in untranslated Latin. The author permits himself only one page of commentary. Jonker seems not to have used any primary work of Augustine. Polman provided him with an entrance to our African father. Yet also Polman remains a secondary source. A student should (be able to) check if his overview of Augustine's work does him justice. Alas, even Polman fails to point his students either to an edition or translation where this vital work, *Ad Simplicianum*, can be found. Jonker stated: 'The writing *Ad Simplicianum* (395) shows that Augustine had already gained clarity on election before the Pelagian controversy'. It is to this source that we now turn. O'Donnell wrote: 'The most important and least-read book Augustine ever wrote was the *Diverse Questions for Simplicianus* of about 396.'

While reading the less-known *Ad Simplicianum* it struck me that it's composition fell in the same year in which Augustine started to write his *Confessiones*, in 397. Augustine himself pointed to this first work written in his episcopacy as the turning point in his doctrine of grace. While reading both work *in tandem* several points of contact struck me, apart from the year of writing and their scope, describing transformation. To mention a few: in both works the name of Simplician of Mailand features; both works testify to a period of intensive study of St. Paul, in both work Romans 7 plays a large role, at a very specific point in his thinking Romans 9 is present in the diverse destiny of the twins, Esau and Jacob. These points of contact made me wonder what a comparison of both works could yield.

3. Early Readings in Romans

All early preachers and expositors of the letters of St. Paul have encountered the passages, written in Greek, on election. The Latin verb *praedestinare* was chosen to translate the Greek *pro'orizō* (to determine beforehand) of telling passages as Romans 8:29-30 and Ephesians 1:5. The term is already found in the commentaries of Marius Victorinus (281/91-c.365) and the so-called Ambrosiaster. Although Augustine profitted most from Ambrosiaster (as I documented in the

full version of this lecture), Marius Victorinus – called Afer – is important for another reason (to which I hope to come shortly).

Having left Europe and having reached the African shore Augustine visited Hippo Regius in 391. Soon he was made presbyter and received the task of preaching at Easter 392. Having written a running commentary on Galatians, Augustine undertook in the same year of his priesthood in Carthage his *Epistolae ad Romanos inchoata expositio*, but did not proceed his intended exposition.

In 394 also he wrote the *Explanation of Some Themes from the Apostle's Epistle to the Romans*. He took as *propositiones* key phrases of Romans in consecutive order, giving not a full running commentary but still an exposition of the main thoughts. The concept of God's foreknowledge of man's future acts is Augustine's key to understand how election, (effectual) calling, and justification are linked. This passage shows not trace of any discomfort, but is a straightforward exposition of the proposition "those he called, he also justified" (Rom. 8:30). Looking back at this first commentary on Romans in later years Augustine observed: 'I said little about the call itself which is given according to the purpose of God. For this is not true of all who are called, but only of the elect'. Even the merit of faith itself is a gift of God. Present hardness of heart, however, does not come from God (as the preceding gift of faith does), but from preceding impiety of man himself. The doctrine of grace for sinners was the base line. On Romans 9:15 ("I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion") Augustine commented: 'First therefore God is merciful for us, because we were sinners, so that he might call us'.

4. Final factors in conversion (*Confessiones*)

It was the conversion of the famous Roman rhetor Marius Victorinus, related to him by Simplician, that had a most profound impact on Augustine. We met him as expositor of Paul's letters. In *Confessiones* VIII, the chapter on Augustine's conversion, it is he who brought up the name of Victorinus in a conversation with Ambrosius. 'In order to exhort me to the humility of Christ', he told Augustine of the old man's conversion (c.356). Augustine was deeply impressed by the simple words with which Victorinus made his change of mind public: 'Let us go to church: I want to become a Christian'. Was the fact that Marius Victorinus is known as Afer – from Africa – another factor inviting Augustine to follow the example of his countryman on the *via humiliationis*?

This was the turning point. 'But when that man of you, Simplicianus, told me this of Victorinus, I was on fire to imitate him; for for this very end had he related it'. Then followed the battle between the two wills, to which Romans 7 forms the background. The next and final stage in his conversion is the example of Ponticianus, again 'a countryman of ours', as Augustine noted. While visiting him, Ponticianus came upon a book (*codex*): 'he took it, opened it, and found that it was the apostle Paul, totally unexpected'. Augustine points out that he occupied himself intensely with these writings (*me scripturis curam maximam impendere*). It seems that Romans 7 made him clear how wretched he was, both willing and unwilling to let go of all earthly hope and commit himself wholly to God. He kept hesitating 'to die of death and to live for life'. When at last his resistance broke he wept and heard the words, spoken in a child's voice: *tolle lege, tolle lege* ('take it and read, take and read it'). Taking these words as a command from God Augustine took the book – which again is the *codex* of St. Paul, mentioned before in his tale of Ponticianus's visit. He opened the book and read the first passage he saw: 'not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissention and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature',

being Romans 13:13-14. 'You have converted me to you', Augustine confessed at the end of *Confessiones* VIII.

It is to Romans 7 that Simplician's first question to Augustine is related. 'In this text it seems to me clear that the apostle has put himself in the place of someone who is under the law'. The description of the struggle between willing and (not) doing was a mirror of Augustine's inner conflict. Does no freedom of choice thus remain? That we lack the power to do the good we wish is 'thanks to the domination of covetousness, which is strengthened not only by the bond of mortality but also by the millstone of habit'. This last clause seems to reflect Augustine's self analysis from the *Confessiones*.

5. Answer to Simplician I/2

We encountered Simplicianus as the person who told Augustine of the rhetor Marius Victorinus's conversion. Although older than Ambrose, who considered him his teacher, Simplician would succeed him as bishop of Mailand in 397. By then Simplician already was an old man. While Ambrose was Augustine's spiritual mentor who held his distance, Simplician was the older friend.

His original letter with questions to the young bishop Augustine has not survived. O'Donnell suggests that Simplician send him 'leading questions, doubtless designed to provoke a reaction'. At the end of the fifth century Gennadius of Marsillia still had access to the original contents and wrote in his *De viris illustribus* (c.475), a kind of 'Who is Who in the Catholic Church': 'There even exists a letter from him with suggestions, in which he teaches the teacher by questioning him as if to be taught'. And: 'for those interested in understanding Augustine on grace, there is no detour around this part of *Ad Simplicianum*'. An early indicator to the study of source texts!

James Wetzel described the first part of *Ad Simplicianum* as follows: 'In striking contrast to the rest of the work, the second part of book 1, on Romans 9:10-29, sets off a veritable revolution in his theology'. An intriguing aspect of the book is that the reader is witness to Augustine's struggle between his earlier thinking and the force of the biblical text. In *Ad Simplicianum* Augustine struggled while trying to answer the questions of a friend and wrote while struggling and finally yielding to a fresh understanding.

Ad Simplicianum contains similar works, theological answers to questions evoked by the text of Scripture. In the second part of book one Augustine explains Romans 9, verses 10-29, providing grounds for St. Paul's statement that Rebecca was pregnant [of twins] 'by one man'. Although Augustine seems to give a verse by verse explanation, I would call this work a biblical-theological essay. He reads Romans 9 from the perspective of the apostle's main thought: 'this is that no one should boast of the merits of works' (I 2.2). Grace precedes works, 'not in order to do away with works, but in order to show that works do not precede but follow upon faith'. To emphasize faith as God's gift the apostle provided proof 'by referring to those who had not yet been born', Esau and Jacob, 'conceived from a single act of intercourse'. Paul states the obvious that the unborn twins had not yet done anything right or wrong. It thus was not because of their works that God called them, saying: 'The older would serve the younger'.

The usual explanation of predestination was that God foreknew the future actions of man, either good or evil. In his *praescientia* God reacts to faithfulness by election and to faithlessness by rejection. In his *Answer to Simplician* we see Augustine struggling with the question how to explain the adverse fate of Esau and Jacob within recourse to the concept of foreknowledge of the twins's future acts. If God let Jacob's future faith count, then his love is based on Jacob's merit – which St. Paul denies. The early expositors of St. Paul realised that the saying 'I loved Jacob but I hated Esau' (Rom. 9:13) was not spoken to Rebecca but actually written in Malachi 1 with respect to the two peoples Edom and Israel against the background of a

history of animosity. But that is taken as the fulfilment of the divine orcale, saying that "The older would serve the younger".

Augustine asks: how can Jacob be chosen in any sense of the word when there was no difference between him and his (older) brother? He takes the verb *eligere* as it was defined in colloquial Latin: the action of choosing by distinguishing which part to choose out of a plurality (*actio elegendi, distinguendi, qua ex pluribus pars eligitur*). This strict definition of *eligere* is proof that Augustine did not consider the possible exclusively jubilating use of Ephesians 1. The question remains: what is the criterium of this divine choice between two seemingly equal human beings, when it is not God's foreknowledge of our future actions? Augustine finds an answer in the very last words of Romans 9, verse 11. 'It was because of him who, by calling the wicked to faith, makes him righteous by grace' (I 2.6). The choice results from the purpose of God (*ex proposito electio*). I said: Augustine finds an answer. Not the answer. He sees a distinction between the *propositum Dei* and *electio*. The grounds for this 'purpose' remain hidden in God. Augustine resorts to St. Paul's indignation at anyone questioning God's justice (Rom. 9:14). The important change is: from the perspective of God's foregoing knowledge of man's future acts to (what he would call later) God's foreknowledge of his own future acts. In *Ad Simplicianum* he finds a way to understand and express how the harsh sayings of Romans 9 can be read: it is God's eternal purpose that is expressed as election unto salvation of sinners.

What then of Esau? 'On the basis of what merit was Esau hated before he was born?' Quoting Sapientia 11:25 Augustine maintains that God cannot hate what he himself created. And 'it is unjust that he would have hated Esau when there was no unrighteousness to merit it' (I 2.8). When the merit of future faith cannot be the ground for election, then God's foreknowledge of Esau's future unbelief and godless lifestyle can not be taken as the 'merit' or ground for his rejection. Quoting Romans 9:15 ('For Moses says: I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy ...') Augustine states dialectically: 'With these words he solves the problem – or rather, complicates it further' (I 2.9). Even if his answer may not satisfy our thinking, there is no denying that Augustine's reasoning is brutally honest. Considering Esau he takes the same starting point: whether or not God calls someone to salvation, that is, calls him effectively. God 'himself compels no one to sin but only does not bestow on certain sinners the mercy of being made righteous by him, and for that reason it is said that he hardens certain sinners because he does not have mercy on them, not because he forces them to sin' (I 2.16). The supposition is that all men are 'a kind of single mass of sin'. Why God does to grant mercy to every individual is beyond our understanding and remains hidden in God's most secret judgement.

When it is said 'I hated Esau', God does not hate the human being as he created him, but the sin in him and hence Esau the sinner. God does not hate 'what he does in creation (*creando*) nor what he does in them by his decree (*ordinando*)' (I 2.18). Augustine compares this with a judge who hates theft in the thief, but does not 'hate' the sentence in sending him to the mines. This way he distinguished between God's (hidden) decision not to give graciously faith to some and the actual faithlessness with which some react to the call of the Gospel. Which to us does not help to understand God's decision, but is meant to speak with respect of God. One positive point is noted by Augustine: the fact that God's abhorrence of sin is a 'beneficial fear to which others must be exposed and to the making known of the riches of his glory to the vessels of his mercy, which he has prepared for glory', quoting Romans 9:23 (I 2.18).

Predestination is to Augustine in *Ad Simplicianum* God's *propositum* of graciously calling of some sinners and of effectively granting them faith, which together is election. He finds it expressed in Romans 11:5, 'A remnant that was chosen by grace'. The deepest ground 'is so very hidden that it can by no means be discerned by us who are in the same lump' (I 2.22). Augustine ends his answer to his old friend Simplician by inviting him to 'say "Alleluia" and join in a canticle', as St. Paul ended Romans 9-11 in doxology.

6. In retrospect

Augustine himself was very much aware of a difference between the theology of his old age and the writing of his younger years. He himself pinpointed the turning point in his understanding of God's grace in his answers to Simplician. Two times he underlined in retrospect the importance of this rather small work. Pointedly he dated this work as 'The first two books that I worked on as a bishop' and 'at the beginning of my episcopate, before the Pelagian heresy came upon the scene'. The first time he evaluated *Ad Simplicianum* was in the second book of his *Retractationes* near the end of his life: 'In resolving the question, I really worked for the free choice of the human will, but the grace of God won out'. It is as if Augustine tried to maintain the idea of free choice in our side, but had to yield to the pressure of free grace from God's side as set forth in Romans 9.

The second time Augustine referred to *To Simplician* was c. 428 in *Predestination of the saints*. He simply quoted what he had already written in the *Retractationes* and added: 'God revealed this to me in the answer to the question that, as I said, I was writing to Simplician'. When his final position is based upon God's revelation, it is beyond questioning. The historian of dogma, however, must evaluate this claim. In the sequel, *De dono perseverantiae*, Augustine again referred to *Ad Simplicianum*, but this time only summarizing the essence, 'that even the beginning of faith is God's gift' (21.55). In this sequel he would explain that also the end of our faith, having persevered until the end of our life, is a gift of God, and not the fruit of our lifelong devotion – as the monks of oversea's Provence would give it.

7. Conclusion

Why an inaugural lecture on predestination? Because this angle of thought highlights the doctrine of grace as primarily and ultimately God's free gift (however contrary it seems to our feelings). I wanted to give an example of what can be harvested from a fresh reading of a lesser known text by Augustine. I harvest the following conclusions.

1. The origin of Augustine's doctrine of predestination lies in his early years, the first year as a *episkopos*. Even though not all elements are as developed as in his final writings of 428 (an important development being the election of Christ in his humanity and of us as his body), the basis is there. In Romans 9 he found himself confronted with the radical denial of the relevance of the merit of human work and thus the radical accent on God's decision of graciously calling some and effectively giving them faith.
2. We found important connections between *Ad Simplicianum* and the *Confessiones* in the repeated reference to his study of the letters of St. Paul, in Marius Victorinus as example of conversion and as preceding expositor of the pauline corpus, and the featuring of Simplician who may have been a teacher to the young Augustine by following his development and probing him with questions. Another aspect, skipped this evening, is his thinking on the great difference between the twins, Esau and Jacob, however identical in their beginning.
3. We may have learned that Romans 9(-11) is not so much a *locus de praedestinatione*, but the gospel of God's unbroken election of Israel against the background of the rejection of the Messiah by many. Still, these Pauline chapters confront us again with apostolic teaching that should be analysed in biblical theology and thought over in its implications in systematic theology.

This evening it was my privilege to provide patristic material for ongoing studies from the lively context of Africans and Europeans, meeting then as we do now.