Augustine and Free Will

Written by K B Napier
Saturday, 20 August 2016 20:56

On August 28th the Roman Catholic organisation celebrates a feast day dedicated to Augustine. This is a reminder for Christians that Augustine was a Catholic, though one with his own mind. He believed the will is free.

Augustine said there can be no denying man has a will. Well, yes he has. This much is obvious. This Augustine calls *"good will",* which he defined as *"a will by which we seek to live a good and upright life and to attain unto perfect wisdom"*
. He assumed that if this is the case, then the will 'must be' free. Even so, it does not prove Man has 'free will'. It only proves that men saved by grace are free to choose between good and evil. This 'good will' however, does not exist in unbelievers. To put it bluntly, even a rat in a science lab can be taught how to avoid bad outcomes and to find good outcomes (usually in terms of food or pain). The Roman Catholic catechism repeats the belief of Augustine concerning 'freewill'.

Rome teaches that *"Humans always choose to do good"* (catholic.org). This is patently not the case. The Catholic idea explains it this way:
"It's just a matter of whether one chooses a lesser 'good'."
So, the 'good' is just a choice between two evils, and this equals 'free will'! The gaps in logic are huge.

For Augustine, evil exists because human beings have free will (sparknotes.com). But, he forgot that Lucifer committed the first sin. This was followed swiftly by the sins of an unknown number of angels who were thrown out of Heaven with him. Then, Lucifer tempted Eve to sin, and she tempted Adam to sin. We are not told Lucifer and his fellow angels (who then became demons) have 'free will'. Rather, it is assumed. As for Adam, I have written elsewhere that he did not have free will, but only a partial will. Otherwise, with total free will, he would have been God Himself! No, sin exists because Lucifer stood against God and then led the first humans to do what God commanded them not to do. It was an act of will, but not of 'free' will.

 Note that Augustine's ideas were shaped in part by the hypotheses of Manicheanism and Neoplatonism. A 'Christian' named Mani, in North Africa, tried to combine Christianity and Zoroastrianism. He taught that the world is in constant battle, fought between good (from God) and evil (from Satan). Christians unfortunately are caught between the two forces, which are viewed as equal. This equality means the body is evil and belongs to Satan, whereas the soul is 'light'. To escape the influence of evil, the body must practice asceticism and meditation (elements of which can be found in Quakerism). Satan was viewed as responsible for all evil,

but mankind was not held responsible. In his early days, Augustine followed this idea, until he broke with it because he thought Man had 'freewill' and was therefore responsible for his own sins and thus for suffering. That Man is responsible for his sins and for the ensuing suffering is correct.

He then 'bounced' away from Manicheanism and into Neoplatonism. This was begun by Plato's follower, Plotinus, and had the greater influence on Augustine. Neo-Platonism was the 'in thing' at the time of Augustine and he fell under its charm. The basic assertion is that Plato saw a distinction between things physical and tangible, and things not tangible e.g. ideas or 'Forms'. The latter he saw as unchanging, perfect and everlasting. Because he saw tangible things as prone to corruption, he suggested we should put all our effort into understanding what is incorruptible – Forms or ideas. The tangible world, for him, was just a shadow of the perfect. But Jesus said otherwise – we can sin in mind as well as in body!

Plato thus distinguished body and soul, the soul being perfect and trapped in the body, thus ensuring tension between the two. Augustine accepted this notion, but rejected Plotinus' assertion that the body was unimportant. Augustine taught that we bring evil upon ourselves by choosing what was corruptible in physical terms, instead of choosing what was incorruptible. Thus, he said God did not allow evil to exist – it exists because we choose it by our actions and words. Later, he admitted he did not know why suffering exists.

Interesting though this background is, Augustine did not get it quite right. God DOES allow sin to exist, but for purposes we do not know, and evil exists in each one of us in varying degrees, often in the realm of ideas or Forms. This strengthens the assertion that Man does not have freewill, but only a modified type of it.

He went on to say that certitude exists (not taught by earlier philosophies), because simply saying certitude 'probably' exists automatically proves it does exist! And if truth does not exist, neither does probability. He added that happiness is the result of acquired wisdom (which is different from the Christian belief in 'joy'), Augustine also believed that our senses can be trusted, though observation and facts seem to contradict such a view.

Freewill, then, is not proved to exist by Augustine. The Platonic influence detracts from biblical truth. For example, we cannot trust our Christian senses when we do not live 'by faith', and cannot trust them at all when we are unbelievers. Yet, Augustine taught that 'freewill' is not the agent of salvation, but God's predestination is. Thus, though man has a will free to choose, his

choices cannot include salvation, and this is the real crux of the argument, meaning that a will free to choose is not the same as 'freewill'.

As I have shown elsewhere, it all depends on how we define 'freewill'. As many have concluded, freewill and predestination are incompatible, and freewill becomes an illusion. However, some theologians say that Augustine's treatment of both predestination and freewill show themselves to be mutually true. It is my view that freewill in man does not exist.

A Romanist View

"Augustine helps Christians today understand the importance of understanding the use of one's free will. We live in an age when its ramifications to one's life are practically denied. If we have a free will, then we also have the duty to make decisions based on a well-formed conscience and what is good and evil. What determines whether a particular action is good does not depend on one's own judgment on whether "it feels good" or "does not hurt anyone."

Instead, we have a duty to determine good and evil based on truth and to have it rule one's life, with passion and desire subject to it. When people are ruled by feelings, it necessarily diminishes the dignity of a person. When a soul is not well-ordered, the ability to use one's will freely is diminished, but not obliterated completely. Rather, we have the duty to work to order our souls correctly, no matter how low we've gotten."

(http://www.catholic.org/featured/headline.php?ID=1282)

Both Rome, then, and Augustine, had a skewed view, for no man can "order (his) soul correctly" unless he is saved and living a holy life. Without salvation and continual sanctification, no man can think clearly, and so his will is subject to error. That means he cannot have a free will.

"Augustine argues that desire can never overwhelm an agent; because they have intellects and wills, agents are not determined by basic bodily desires. Rather, an agent gives in to desire in virtue of the will, which operates freely and never under compulsion. In fact, if a will were ever coerced, Augustine says it would not be a will. Thus, human beings commit sins freely by giving into the desire for temporal things, which the intellect and will could disregard in favor of the eternal things that human beings ought to pursue." (htt p://www.iep.utm.edu/freewi-m/#SH2a

)

From this we can see a flaw in Augustine's view, for he does not separate saved from unsaved, who ARE ruled by their senses, especially in our day when sensuality and sex are movers of the will. Augustine said that if a will is coerced, it cannot be a will. Then what of the unsaved man, whose father, Jesus said, is the devil, and who MUST do what his father commands? If this is so, then an unsaved man is not using his faculties properly and does not choose sin in the Christian sense of the word, but must sin because it is his nature and he is ruled by his evil father. Augustine was never able to deal fully with this matter in his lifetime. As with all theological writers, including myself, caution must be used and biblical truth determined.

© August 2016

---oOo---

{loadposition btm_address}