

“Seek and ye shall find”

It has been claimed that St. Augustine (354-430 A.D.) was a very influential Christian theologian (Gascoigne 1977) and a great Christian philosopher (Meagher 1978). He authored more than thirty books and communicated much of his thoughts through long letters. His writings have influenced many spheres of Western thought in the centuries following his death. One of his major books, "The City of God", is still inspired reading for many Christian scholars.

When St. Augustine was a priest, his congregation saw him as the man who knew, always sharp and questioning and never failing to express himself on the deep Biblical issues.

The early church had seen repeated waves of intense persecution during the first, second and third centuries. This persecution served to filter the sincere core of genuine believers out of the crowd that bore the Christian label. However by the time of Augustine the church had more or less settled down as an integral part of Roman society. Augustine was to champion the cause of the established church against other religious groups all claiming to be the true Christian church.

Augustine was born in the year 354 A.D in a north African town located in present-day Algeria. He was of a poor family but, among other things, the prayers of his mother and the sacrifices of his father set in motion a chain of events that culminated in the significant achievements of St. Augustine.

Patricius, Augustine's father dedicated himself to the task of ensuring that Augustine got a classical education, which he considered vital for the success of his son. Augustine did not fail his father in this regard and by age thirty-one he was a professor of rhetoric in the Italian town of Milan.

Yet there remained two setbacks: first of all being African, Augustine was still in some ways treated as an alien by established Roman society of the fourth century; and secondly he never learned Greek and was thus robbed of some of the joys of delving into the untranslated Greek writings. More significantly however, Augustine's education taught him how to express himself very convincingly and this he did on numerous important occasions.

"Seek, and ye shall find", a scriptural message (Matthew 7: 7, KJV) that aptly sums up Augustine's search for truth, is one of the very few scriptural quotations that he used in his first works. He wished that his number one desire in life would always be the discovery of truth, and he claimed that it was his mother's prayers that gave birth to such a noble desire in his life.

This pursuit of truth took Augustine, while still a youth, into the realm of philosophy. The acquisition of truth meant the acquiring of answers to many key questions pertaining to life. Augustine longed for these answers. He searched for the answer to the question **"what is the cause of evil?"**, and felt that Manichaeism had that answer.

Manichaeism is the religion that was founded by Mani, who was born in an aristocratic southern Babylonian family in the year 216. Mani called himself "apostle of Jesus Christ" and prescribed a code of practice which required an ascetic lifestyle in order to liberate oneself from darkness or evil. This religion gained many followers throughout the Roman Empire.

Augustine continued to question and search for the truth and at one time his hero was "**doubting**" Thomas (see John 20: 24-29). Such was the extent of his yearning for the divine secrets.

This yearning, this questioning, this seeking after the truth soon brought disillusion, and when he arrived in Milan at age thirty-one as professor of rhetoric, the answers which he thought he had acquired had been proven inadequate. But alas he did not stop the searching and the questioning. He was determined to have his deep longings satisfied.

So often in our strivings the most frustrating moments are experienced just before the point of victory. We are tempted to give up. If we do give up we will never enjoy that triumph. We must persist in applying the Biblical admonition, "*Seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you*", Matthew 7: 7, KJV. Augustine was quite aware of this. He felt that if he hesitated to knock then the truths would not be opened to him.

"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened." (Matthew 7: 7-8, NIV)

The search was rewarded. When thirty-two years old Augustine became a serious Christian, and retired from his academic career to pursue a life as a monk dedicated afresh to the discovery of the truth. In the year 387, at age thirty-three, he was baptized a Catholic, and four years later he was ordained to the priesthood. The critical, seeking academic was now **submitting to "The Truth", i.e., to Jesus** (who said: "*I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me*", John 14: 6, NIV). In the year 395 he was made Bishop of Hippo, a north African town.

Augustine was to spend the remaining years of his life using his critical mind in the defense of the church against whatever he perceived as departing from the truth. Augustine viewed the church as a place for sinners saved by grace (the unmerited favor of God). "*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast*" Ephesians 2:8-9 (NIV). He stressed the "**Case for Grace**" in a literary work of the same name which some regard as the high-water mark of his writing.

Augustine's consuming passion was the search for and the communication of the truth. Whatever he considered critical to this pursuit of truth had to be questioned whenever necessary. So great was his regard for this facility to get at the root of things that in writing about gardening he said, "It is as though you could **question the vital force in each root and bud** on what it can do, and what it cannot, and why" (Peter Brown 1967).

Indeed Augustine realized that, in his own words, "**it is yearning that makes the heart deep**". (Peter Brown 1967).

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References

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