

Augustine of Hippo's Biggest Blunder

*His New Theology - Irresistible Grace - ref.
Eph.2:8.*

The Error

Ephesians chapter 2 verse 8 was Augustine of Hippo's proof text for his new doctrine of "irresistible" faith. He denied the free will of man claiming that faith was given by God, even to babies, at baptism. He came to believe that faith was coerced into babies when they were baptized.

He relied on a Latin translation of the scriptures which read similarly to the Authorized Version rendering:- "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God:" From this he reasoned that the word "that" referred to the word "faith" therefore faith has to be given by God, so man is unable to exercise faith of his own freewill.

This new doctrine, called "the doctrine of irresistible grace" or "the doctrine of irresistible faith", came to be known as "*The New Theology*". Except for one or two heretical sects, like the Gnostics and the Manichaeans, early Christian writers acknowledged that men and angels had freewill. Any new doctrine arising after the passing of the Apostles was considered spurious. Despite that Augustine's novel theology gained acceptance by the church of Rome.

His theology has permeated almost the whole of Western Christendom. There is hardly a sect or denomination whose tenets are not tarnished with it. In Roman Catholicism it is seen in the "baptismal regeneration" of babes. Calvin's refined version of the doctrine is seen, to greater and lesser degree, in most Protestant and evangelical movements.

The Blunder

Augustine was reluctant to consult the original languages to see if they differed from the Latin version that he used. Even if he had only an elementary knowledge of New Testament Greek grammar, if he had consulted the original text, it would have been obvious to him that the word "that" cannot refer to the word "faith". Had he done that Christendom would have been spared a doctrine which with all its ramifications has plagued virtually the whole of the west. Paul was not saying that faith is a gift.

The Greek of Ephesians 2:8

"For by **grace** are ye saved through **faith**; and **that** not of yourselves: it is the gift of God:" AV.

τη γαρ {FOR BY THE} χαριτι {GRACE - a **feminine** noun} εστε {YE ARE} σεσωσμενοι {SAVED} δια {THROUGH} της {THE} πιστεως {FAITH - a **feminine** singular noun} και {AND} τουτο {THIS - a **neuter** singular demonstrative pronoun} ουκ {NOT} εξ {OF} υμων {YOURSELVES} θεου το {GOD'S} δωρον {GIFT;}

In Greek as in English all nouns and pronouns are male or female or neuter. Unlike English, the gender of inanimate objects and of abstract nouns can be male or female or neuter.

The word "this" ("that" in the AV) is a demonstrative pronoun. The ends of Greek demonstrative pronouns change according to whether they are referring to male or female or neuter objects/abstract ideas.

The word for "**this**" has a **neuter** ending.

In this verse there are two nouns: "faith" and "grace". Could the word "this" be referring to one of these?

To do that the word "this" must be the same gender as the word it refers to.

The Greek word for "**faith**" is a **feminine** noun, not neuter. So "this" cannot be referring to "faith". This distinction is not apparent in the Latin or English. We do not alter the ends of the words "this" or "that" to show whether they refer to masculine or feminine or neuter objects.

Now God's grace is free and the verse emphasises that whatever "this" happens to be - it is a gift. So could "this" be referring to "grace"? The answer has again got to be no because the Greek word for **grace** is also **feminine**.

So what does "this" refer to?

Some think that "this" must have an antecedent. An antecedent is a word in a sentence that comes before a relative pronoun to which the relative pronoun relates. For example in the sentence: "This is the house which John built "which" is a relative pronoun that refers back to "the house". However in Ephesians 2:8 the word "this" is not a relative pronoun - It is a demonstrative pronoun. Now demonstrative pronouns do not have antecedents. So "this" does not grammatically relate to any word in that sentence. The plot thickens. What then does "this" refer to?

A demonstrative pronoun demonstrates - for example when someone points at something and says "Can you see that?" - but in written work, as here, the object or idea is inferred in the context. So what is the idea being portrayed in the context of this verse? It is telling us how our salvation is achieved. It was not by our efforts that our salvation and the things accompanying our salvation were made possible, God achieved it through Christ Jesus (verses 4 to 10). It follows that "this" is referring to *the manner* in which salvation is procured. Salvation is not attained by our efforts - it is given by God.

There is a Greek abstract noun for the means by which salvation is achieved. It is: σωτηριον. It is a **neuter** adjectival noun, translated "salvation" in the AV of Luke 2:30, 3:6, Acts 28:28, Eph. 6:17 and Titus 2:11. In Luke 2:30 Simeon saw in baby Jesus God's means of procuring salvation. So it is appropriate that "this" has a neuter ending since it is also referring to the means by which our salvation is achieved.

So what is Paul saying? Bear in mind that the word "grace" simply means favour and the type of "faith" referred to here is implicit trust in God through the Lord Jesus, not the shallow faith denounced by James (James 2:14 to 24).

In verse 8, Paul is telling us that God, being favourably disposed towards us, saved us because we had put our total trust in Him. Moreover, we did not achieve our salvation for ourselves - God freely procured our salvation (and that through Christ Jesus v.7). So there is no merit on our part.

2 Corinthians 5:19 AV "...God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself ..." and He went through it all, from beginning to end, willingly and freely, without charge, all for us.

Romans 5:8 AV "But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us". He procured it through the Lord Jesus.

Augustine of Hippo - The Man

Augustine (AD 354-430), a Berber of North Africa who became a Bishop in the church in Hippo, is to be distinguished from the Papal emissary Augustine, a monk who, in AD 596, was sent by Pope Gregory to bring the British churches under the see of the Roman church.

Although Augustine of Hippo was brought up by his mother to be a Christian, for a while he became a Manichaeon. This could have influenced his development of thought. Initially, Augustine acknowledged that man had freewill but later developed the kindred doctrines of "irresistible faith", "predestination" and "original sin". This led him to justify the persecution of those of different persuasions, a thing he had abhorred in his early years.

Recommended reading :

God's Strategy in Human History

Roger T Forester & V. Paul Marston
Highland Books, Broadway, Crowborough
East Sussex, U.K..
ISBN: 094661655 8

Will the Real Heretics Please Stand Up

David W. Bercot
Scroll Publishing. PO. Box 6175, Tylerr, TX 75711, USA.
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