

EPWORTH LEAGUE TOPICS

Epoch Makers in Church History

IV. Augustine, Father of Western Theology

TOPIC FOR LITERARY AND SOCIAL EVENING.
WEEK OF AUGUST 16.

Lesson—Rom. 5.

FREDERICK E. MALOTT.

From the beginning of the second century there was one striking difference between Eastern and Western Theology. In the East the Greek spirit prevailed; in the West the Latin spirit. The Greek spirit was speculative; the Latin spirit was practical. The churches of the West were numerous, populous and wealthy, but they sent a very small deputation to the Council of Niceae. The smallness of the Western contingent to this Council was an indication of the small interest they took in the dispute between Arius and Athanasius. It was not that the West was poor in scholarship and in great men. Already the Western churches had produced men like Clement and Irenaeus and Tertullian and Cyprian. The churches at Rome, Vienna, Lyons, Milan and Carthage were great centres of education and of missionary influence. The Roman community was the most influential of all the churches of the early centuries. Nearly all the doctrinal controversies of the first three centuries were finally decided by the Roman Bishop. But in these churches the interest turned to the practical rather than to the speculative, to the ethical rather than to the intellectual.

Near the close of the fourth century there arose a man in the West who unified the church's thought and gave to theology a new trend and a new life. This man was Augustine, Bishop of Hippo. Like Origen and Athanasius, Augustine came from North Africa. He was born at Tagaste, in Numidia, November

13th, 354. Augustine's father, Patricius, was a heathen. He seems to have been a coarse, brutal, impulsive man, with no spiritual desires or aspirations. Augustine's mother, Monica, however, was a Christian and a woman of deep piety. From her Augustine inherited his warm, loving nature, and to her prayers and consistent life both father and son owed their conversion. In his Confessions, written in later years, Augustine pays the warmest tribute to his mother's character. He tells how she bore her husband's brutality and unfaithfulness with meekness and patience, and how by the sweetness and sincerity of her piety she won her husband for Christ.

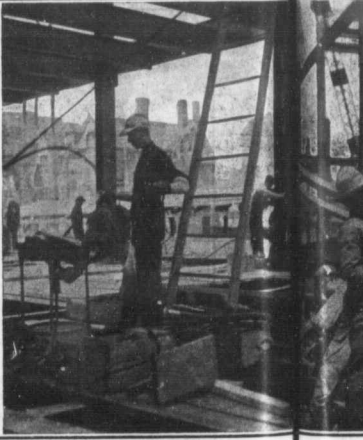
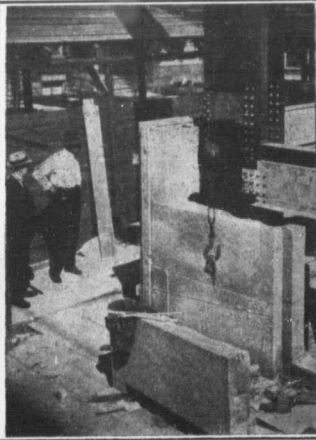
Patricius was not rich, but friends of the family provided the money to give Augustine a liberal education at Carthage. The boy was both bright and ambitious. His aim was to fit himself for a position in the civil service. He did not confine himself strictly, however, to these studies. He read both the Latin and Greek classics, though he never attained proficiency in Greek. Although not a Christian, he was always inclined to religion. One after another he explored all the religions of the world of that day, but found satisfaction in none until he found Christ. For sixteen years he lived in sin. During his school days, he joined, while still a mere boy, a dissolute company who gave themselves to sensual pleasures. Carthage was a wicked city. It was no place for a hot-blooded youth like Augustine. He was away from his mother's influence. He had no high standard of morals set before him in the classics he studied. To the heathen world of that day the life he was living was not judged as we judge it. Still Augustine was not satisfied with his life.

Having graduated from the school at Carthage, Augustine began to teach, first in Tagaste, then in Carthage, and later in Rome. He came to Rome in 383. A year later he was transferred to Milan. For-

tunately for him, his mother followed him. At this time Ambrose was Bishop of Milan. Augustine soon became interested in his preaching. Many of the questions that had hitherto puzzled him were cleared up by Ambrose. And now came a spiritual crisis in Augustine's life. He longed to be a better man. He felt that he ought to be a Christian; but his old habits held him. At last, however, by a supreme decision, he broke loose from the chains of sin that had held him bound and found peace in Christ. At Easter of the year 387 he was baptized by Ambrose in the church at Milan. That same year his mother died. It seemed as though her work was done when she saw her son brought into the Church.

Like many a man who has tried the pleasures of the world and found them unsatisfying, Augustine resolved to devote himself to a life of retirement and meditation. For this purpose, with a company of like-minded persons, he returned to Tagaste. At that time the monastic life was considered the highest and holiest, and, therefore, the surest road to salvation. To the monastic life Augustine dedicated himself. He soon became a recognized leader of the monastic company at Tagaste, and through the urgent requests of his friends he accepted ordination, first as a presbyter and then as a bishop. The office of Bishop of Hippo he held from 395 to the day of his death in 430.

Now began his great work for the Church. It had been given to him to sound all the depths and heights of spiritual experience in his own soul, to prove in his inmost heart the consoling power of the Gospel, out of sin and agony of conscience to reach the blessedness of communion with God. Like Paul before him and Luther after him. Having been a student of both Manichaeism and Neo-Platonism, he had learned the futility of seeking salvation through these systems. Having vainly tried by his own good resolves and efforts to break from sin, he knew the insufficiency of human efforts unaided by divine grace. The Christian Church, through her representative, the Bishop of Milan, had brought him salvation, as he thought, through her sacraments. He now felt that the duty of his life was to proclaim, first the gospel of sin and grace, and then the glory of the



FOR SOME ACCOUNT OF THESE PICTURES READ BUILD NG