Many Christians are not as forgiving as we would hope, and like to be judgmental about fellow believers, for whatever reason. This is particularly so in reformed circles, as if reformed men and women are free of sin completely. Yet, how many know that one of their most revered idols, Augustine of Hippo, had an illegitimate son when he was only 17 years of age? And now they know, do they think any the less of the man who, along with a few others, can be regarded as foundational to our modern understanding of the Reformation?

The Concubine

Augustine lived in the last stages of Roman imperialism, when marriage was strictly controlled. Who one married was judged, and had to be of the same class and lineage. To cater to relationships that did not fit this strict requirement there were concubines. In essence they were no different from the unmarried women of today, who may have a long-term illicit relationship with one man and bear children.

In Augustine’s case he had a relationship with his unnamed woman for 13 years and he was a sixteen year old student when she conceived in 372-3. He did not become a Christian until he was 33. He tells of his ‘impure love’ in his ‘Confessions’, and about his taking a concubine in Carthage. At that time a woman who remained in a stable relationship avoided being called a prostitute, and many young men stayed with concubines until they married other women. In Augustine’s case he was not of the same caste as the woman, so was forbidden to wed her. Churches (mainly early Catholic) at that time did not outrightly condemn these liaisons.

Augustine finally parted from the concubine to live with another concubine, his son, Adeodatus, being his close friend, and highly intelligent. The mother returned to Africa. Later, Augustine travelled to Milan to take up a teaching post. In 387, under the influence of his mother, Monica, Augustine and his son, aged 15, were baptised into the ‘catholic’ church. Soon, the son was driving Augustine’s intellectual endeavours, with his own sharp intellect, but the boy did not live for much longer.

It is interesting that though the churches and bishops during Augustine’s lifetime did not say much about his relationship with the concubines, today’s Catholic Encyclopaedia calls it an ‘illicit relationship’, and a ‘sinful union’. Also, the Catholic source says there was no known reason why he did not marry the concubine. Thus, the RC church deliberately chooses to ignore how its own bishops lived in those days, virtually accepting illicit relationships.
What Augustine first called his ‘child of my sin’, was soon to become his joy, though this was short-lived. But, what interests me is the reaction of the churches at that time and today.

If Augustine lived now, how would the churches respond to his illicit behaviour? I trust they would condemn it. But, after his conversion, with an illegitimate child in tow – what would they do? Ignore his intellectual stature and theological deliberations, because of his past? I fear this is exactly what they would do!

Many men of God do the most stupid things when younger... and even when older. Many act as Augustine did, and not just before conversion, either. Yet, they repent and are forgiven by God. Even so, today’s Christians can be very judgmental towards others who sin, as if they have never been guilty themselves.

Would Augustine forever have to deny his son, who, after all, never chose to be illegitimate, or to be born? No, this cannot be right in God’s eyes. The child is the product of sin, not the cause of it. And, is it right, after repentance, to continue to condemn a fellow believer, especially when his theological insights are so powerful?

It is worth thinking about this situation, for many modern Christian men of God fall to this or that sin. What happens? Surely, they stand judged by others, as it ought to be. But, what if they then repent? Is the condemnation carried on indefinitely? If so, is this not the reaction of impure thinking on the part of his judges?

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