

THE STORY OF THE CHURCH - PART 2, TOPICS 6 & 7

Augustine and the Pelagian Controversy

1. Life of Augustine (354-430)
 - a. Youth
 - i. Augustine's father was not a Christian, but his mother Monica was. She played an important part in his life, constantly praying for him and beseeching him to devote himself to Christ. However, he showed no spiritual life. He did show much intellectual promise, though, and he was packed off to school with a view to becoming an academic who could be in government service.
 - b. Young man
 - i. He was a true humanist -- a man who loved life, learning, and soon women. He stayed in the most intellectual, up to date circles. A fashionable religion was sweeping the Empire -- Manicheanism. This religion was based on the teachings of an Easterner named Mani, and was based on a dualistic interpretation of God.
 - ii. Augustine became an ever more successful teacher, and he moved on to Rome and finally to Milan, which was as much the Western capital as Rome was at this time of the Empire. By this time he had grown disillusioned with the Manicheans, because they could not intelligently support their arguments, and they were wrong about certain sciences like astronomy.
 - iii. He came under the preaching and influence of the powerful bishop of Milan, Ambrose. At first he went to hear him for the sheer eloquence of his preaching. Through the study of the Neoplatonists he was at last freed from Manichean doctrines, and began his final journey towards Christ. But he could not deal with the sin of lust, which always pursued him.
 - c. Conversion
 - i. In 386, after learning of the sacrifices that were being performed by Christian monks, he went through a final self condemnation, and while walking outside, he heard a voice say "take up and read, take up and read." He took this as a sign that he was to read the Bible, and he opened it to whatever page it might open to. He read Romans 13:14: "But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts." On that day he was finally by God's grace freed from his lusts, and he resigned his teaching position and made himself ready for the monastic life.
 - d. Bishop
 - i. Back in North Africa, Augustine wanted to live a simple life of godly contemplation, but his peace was short lived. In 391 he was reluctantly made priest; in 396 he took over the job of Bishop of Hippo, a position he held until his death.
 - e. Theologian

- i. We don't even have time to talk about the other aspects of Augustine's career besides his controversy with Pelagius. He is known of course for his *Confessions*, which has been called the first autobiography in European history. These are classic reading for any Christian, but from an evangelical point of view they are not entirely without unfortunate implications for subsequent history. Augustine, like most of the greats in this period of the church, was a huge supporter of monasticism, and he indeed dates his conversion not from the time in which he first believes God's word, but from the time he is enabled to embrace celibacy without reserve.
 - ii. Another prominent feature of Augustine's work was his controversy with the Donatists. The Donatist group dated from the time of the last persecutions in North Africa. They denied the validity of any sacrament performed by unworthy ministers, and had thus separated themselves from what they saw as the corrupt church. Augustine worked hard against them in writings and in public disputations, but ultimately he decided that the authorities had the duty to put down this disorder in the church. In a famous argument he used Luke 14:23 ("Compel them to come in") to justify the state suppression of the minority group. This sealed Church approval of religious repression for the rest of the middle ages and into the Reformation period.
 - iii. Augustine was prominent in his explanations of the doctrine of the Trinity, and in most other issues of the period. He "is generally recognized as having been the greatest thinker of Christian antiquity" (*Britannica*). His *City of God*, a massive explanation of the true interpretation of history from the perspective of the impending fall of Rome, is as much of a classic as his *Confessions*.
2. Introduction to the Pelagian controversy
- a. First, it is necessary to note that these topics had not been brought to the church's attention with any consistency or accuracy until the time of Augustine. This was for several reasons. The doctrine of God and Christ had, as we have seen, taken up the church's attention for many years. More importantly, the chief antagonists of Christianity in the early years were religions and philosophies which placed emphasis on an impersonal fate or determinism that governed men's destinies. Both Greek and Roman religion had this tendency, as well as the more rationalistic philosophies. In addition, the new religion of Manicheanism was very fatalistic. Augustine in his earlier years had to defend the doctrine of human freedom against Manicheanism, and he did it in such a way that partially contradicted his later doctrines which were responses to Pelagius. So, even within the one man Augustine, we can see the growth which the church had to go through to respond to both sides of the freedom/sovereignty issue.

- b. To set this controversy in context in our church today, let us note that unlike the Trinity, these doctrines are still a matter of controversy within almost any evangelical church. The names have been changed, but the issues are the same. "Calvinists" and "Arminians" are the names today, at least in the churches we are familiar with. No one would consent to be called a Pelagian (and you will see why, below), but the dividing line between God's sovereignty and man's sovereignty remains.
 - c. Evangelicals in particular have claimed that there is some middle ground between free will and God's sovereignty. I have heard it said that "God is so sovereign that he limited himself so that man could have real free will." But I believe that such a middle position is non-existent. God says, "I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, Declaring the end from the beginning And from ancient times things which have not been done, Saying, 'My purpose will be established, And I will accomplish all My good pleasure'" (Isa 46:9,10). Either this verse (and hundreds like it) are true, or they are not. It's not that God's sovereignty and man's responsibility are not both true -- they are. But it cannot be true that God has free will and man has free will.
 - d. The study of Augustine, who had to deal with both the Pelagians and the semi-Pelagians, should help us understand the issues. The fact that they were dealt with rather fully 1500 years ago, and are still causing debate, shows that the issue will not soon go away. Nevertheless, I think Augustine's basic arguments stand firm, and cannot be answered. Augustinians (Calvinists) are the ones who are always being accused of presuming to define God, and to reach into realms too deep for man, but I think it is rather the opposite. Augustinians, rather, simply affirm what Scripture plainly teaches, and it is semi-Pelagians and Pelagians who attempt to define God, and having defined him, they are unhappy with the plain Augustinian teaching, and they begin to spin theories that explain God and try to get him out of the trap of being sovereign.
3. Pelagius and his doctrines
- a. Pelagius (c. 354 - after 418) was a monk from Britain (still part of Rome), but not a clergyman. He was a Bible teacher in Rome from about 380-410 -- we would call him a Bible study leader. He ministered to various aristocratic circles, and wrote commentaries on the Bible. He was well respected for his high moral character, even by his opponents.
 - b. He took exception to some tendencies he saw in Augustine's writing, especially the saying in the *Confessions*, "Give what you command, and command what you choose." This sounded like fatalistic teaching to him. He denied that God would command something that was not in the ability of man to do. He blamed the lax moral climate of the Roman Christians on teachings of grace such as this.
 - c. When the Goths attacked Rome in 410, Pelagius, like many others, left the city. He ended up in Africa, in a branch of the church which was heavily influenced by Augustine's leadership.

- d. By this time he had several disciples in different areas. His teachings were identified as:
 - i. Denial of original sin (i.e. depravity or corruption) inherited from Adam. Each person is born as a new, free agent with the same powers of choice and responsibilities as Adam.
 - ii. Denial of original guilt received from Adam's sin. Among other things, this called into question the necessity of infant baptism, since there was nothing an infant needed to be baptized for. However, Pelagius himself held that infant baptism was good and should continue, though not for the remission of infant sins.
 - iii. Affirmation of the ability of men to be free from sin. Consequently, the denial of the necessity of God's working in order to accomplish freedom from sin. The power is in us, even if God helps.
 - e. North African bishops began condemning Pelagius and his views. Around 412 he went to Palestine, where the Eastern clergy were more sympathetic to free will, but also where the Western biblical scholar Jerome lived, who began to stir up trouble for Pelagius in that region.
 - f. After some confusion with Popes and councils⁽¹⁾, Pelagius may have left Palestine. He disappeared from history and possibly died in Egypt. Pelagianism was condemned at the ecumenical council of Ephesus in 431 along with Nestorianism, but there wasn't much examination of Pelagianism at that council. Rather, Nestorius had welcomed some Pelagians to Constantinople and therefore the two heresies were associated in the bishops' minds.
4. Augustine's responses
- a. Augustine spent almost 20 years composing various writings combating the errors of the Pelagians. He was allowed by the end of his life to see the development of the doctrine known as Semi-Pelagianism, and thus was able to write against that compromise version also.
 - b. We do not have time (nor do I have the ability) to summarize and critique each of Augustine's writings individually, so we will perform the more traditional summary of his major themes. *Note that we do not have the time to defend Augustine's doctrines from the Bible, which was his major sourcebook.* We just want to accurately outline them here.
 - c. [Original Sin.] Augustine concentrated on the truth of *Adam's Fall* and its consequences, and the transmission of sin to his descendants. He saw that each human inherits the guilt of sin from his parents, and it all comes from Adam. Not only did Adam act as our representative, but he believed that in some sense we were all in Adam committing the original sin too. (Some of this was based on a mistranslation of Romans 5:12. His Latin bible had the words "in whom all sinned.") As Adam representatively led his "seed" into condemnation and death, so Christ representatively died for his people and imparted righteousness to them. Augustine also speculated on the method of sin's transmission, and his speculations here were less helpful. Participating in the ascetic desires of

all monks, and conditioned by his early lustful life, he held that the act of begetting children was itself sinful, and found hints here of how our Lord remained sinless, since he was conceived without the sexual act. (Psalm 51)

- d. [Total Depravity.] He dwelt at length on the *Corruption of man's nature* and the consequent *lack of freedom of the will* to choose God, exercise faith, or generally perform any act that moves towards restoration to God. To be sure, the freedom of the will to act is not in question, and man still makes his choices. However, his choices are all determined now by his corrupt nature, and in himself he has no ability to choose God. Augustine made some helpful comparisons here. He showed that Adam was in a state of *Able to sin* and *Able not to sin*, but by his sin he rendered himself and his descendants *Not able not to sin*. After death the redeemed saints are finally confirmed in a state which Adam did not enjoy, namely *Not able to sin*.

- e. [Unconditional Election and Irresistible Grace.] As a result of the above, the necessity of the doctrine of the *free grace of God* becomes apparent (not only from the above logic, but from Scripture itself). God must save freely and sovereignly, since we are unable to choose him. God's grace grants everything, so election cannot be based on foreseen future merits. Even faith itself is the gift of God to his elect. Grace and predestination cannot be separated.

"A man's free-will, indeed, avails for nothing except to sin, if he knows not the way of truth; and even after his duty and his proper aim shall begin to become known to him, unless he also take delight in and feel a love for it, he neither does his duty, nor sets about it, nor lives rightly. Now, in order that such a course may engage our affections, God's 'love is shed abroad in our hearts,' not through the free-will that arises from ourselves, but 'through the Holy Ghost, which is given to us.' (Rom 5:5)" (*On the Spirit and the Letter*, 3.5)

Grace and predestination have this difference, that predestination is the preparation, and grace the actual application, of God's unmerited favor.

- f. [Perseverance of the Saints.] Augustine held that none of the elect could finally fall away, but that God would bring all his people to himself. However, his dealing with the problem of "falling away" was different than what we might expect. He taught that there were some who in this life, looked exactly like Christians, and indeed were to all intents and purposes Christians, who actually fell away, and thus proved that they were not elect. This is different from most Calvinistic formulations today, which hold that when a person has once become a Christian, they may attain assurance that they personally will never fall away. In Augustine's system, this assurance was not apparent, and he actually stated that such assurance was unattainable. (See *On the Perseverance of the Saints*.) However, he also stated that the perseverance of God's people was a gift of God, and his people always obtained that gift, and thus always persevered.

- g. Augustine's doctrines were tainted with early Catholic teachings which he never stopped believing:
 - i. The necessity of baptism for salvation. Consequently, the baptism of infants is not to be denied.
 - ii. The confusion of justification with sanctification. Augustine did not have as careful a view of justification as Martin Luther and the other Reformers later developed. He still saw justification as the infusion of righteousness rather than the legal declaration of a sinner's righteous state before God.
 - iii. A general high view of the institutional Church which is not validated by either Scripture or history. (Although it may be said that history seemed to be on his side at that time.)

5. Semi-Pelagianism

- a. By the end of Augustine's life, teachers like John Cassian were developing a middle view which later came to be called (whether accurately or not) Semi-Pelagianism. It is not unfair to say that whatever the official position of various churches, Semi-Pelagianism is the doctrine held by most Christians, including most Protestants and many who would claim Calvinism as their heritage. The original semi-Pelagianism was most popular in Gaul.
 - i. Features of semi-Pelagianism
 1. Cunningham says that the Augustinians and semi-Pelagians agree upon the following two major points: "First, that before men are admitted into heaven they must repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and lead thereafter a life of new obedience; and, secondly, that men have a moral nature *so far* tainted by depravity, that this indispensable process cannot in any instance be carried through without a supernatural gracious work of God's Spirit upon them." (Cunningham, I, p. 348)
 2. But, on to the disagreements. Cassian and the Semi-Pelagians taught that man's nature and will was to be *sick*, not *dead*, in sin. Man's will was able to choose God, though perhaps only able to do that and no other thing; upon choosing God, God gives cooperating grace to enable a person to complete the process of becoming a Christian. Therefore faith is *not* truly a gift of God. Cunningham comments on faith as a gift: "Much pains have been taken to explain how natural and easy faith is, to reduce it to great simplicity, to bring it down as it were to the level of the lowest capacity, -- sometimes with better or more worthy motives, but sometimes also, we fear, in order to diminish, if not to exclude, the necessity of a supernatural preventing [prevenient] work of God' Spirit in producing it." (Cunningham, I, p. 350)
 3. Conversely, in contradiction to Augustine, semi-Pelagians have maintained that a man does have the freedom to resist the grace of God. That is, the grace of God is not *irresistible grace*.

4. It is plain from the above two points that semi-Pelagians did not have a doctrine of *unconditional election* or of a fixed number of the elect. Rather, God "wills" all men to be saved (I Tim 2:4). Semi-Pelagians represent God's election as being based upon a foreknowledge of future actions on the part of each human being. He chooses whom he foreknows will believe.
- ii. Augustine's response to semi-Pelagianism
 1. Augustine wrote at least two books against the semi-Pelagian views, after being acquainted of them by letters from some monks in Gaul. They were called *De Praedestinatione Sanctorum* (On the Predestination of the Saints) and *De Dono Perseverantiae* (On the Gift of Perseverance).
 2. In the first one he proves that even the very beginning of faith, the first tiny steps of faith, even the thinking and willing to believe, are gifts of God, and are not to be separated from the rest of God's gifts as if they are somehow man's contribution to the plan of salvation.
 3. In the second book he treats the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. This is where he proves that perseverance, like the beginning of faith, is likewise the gift of God, and is granted infallibly to the elect. (This is also one of the places where he discusses that strange doctrine whereby God mingles the falling-away people with the people of God.)
 4. Augustine recognized that semi-Pelagianism, by attaching a small, even infinitesimally small, free will and choice to man, came down to the same thing as Pelagianism. It took away the grace of God.
6. Church actions against Pelagianism and semi-Pelagianism
 - a. The North African bishops were always strongly behind Augustine, who was after all one of their own. They condemned Pelagianism at several local councils.
 - b. Pelagius was condemned at the Council of Ephesus in 431, though there seems to have been little discussion of the issues here.
 - c. The Council of Orange, a Western church council, gave the definitive condemnation of semi-Pelagianism and thus became the definitive statement that the Western (i.e. Roman Catholic) church would be officially Augustinian in doctrine.
 7. Mixed results
 - a. However, the church always tended toward Semi-Pelagianism in its theology and especially in its popular piety. At the time of the Reformation it was apparent to the Roman Catholics that thorough Augustinian doctrines were held by the Reformers, and thus a form of semi-Pelagianism was officially adopted at the Council of Trent. (See the

Sixth Session of that council. And incidentally, see the excellent reply by Calvin, which is almost a complete survey on the topic of faith and justification, in his *Tracts and Treatises* vol 3.)

- b. Luther revived the doctrines of Augustine in his emphasis on the bondage of the will and he joined it with an accurate distinction between justification and sanctification and a less magical view of the sacraments. However, his followers, beginning with his assistant Philipp Melancthon, re-introduced "synergy" and Lutheranism became more or less Semi-Pelagian.
- c. All the original Reformers were pretty much strict Augustinians or "Calvinists" in their view of man's depravity and God's sovereign grace. It was Calvin who systematized the doctrines and thoroughly defended sovereign grace, and it was the branch of the Protestants who followed him (which includes almost all English-speaking Protestants) who held longest to Augustinian doctrines.
- d. Arminianism arose among Dutch Calvinists in the 1600's. This was a revival of semi-Pelagian teachings.
- e. Through the influence especially of John Wesley, Arminianism became an accepted form of Protestantism and vied with Calvinism until the end of the 19th century. By the 20th century the victory of Arminianism was almost complete. **Even though the prominent theologians of major conservative seminaries are often some form of Calvinist, the vast majority of popular Christianity continues to pay lip service to "God's Grace" while elevating the will and choice of man above God's plan. Popular evangelicalism affirms the two fundamental doctrines of Semi-Pelagianism -- that the initial step, the "small step" of faith, is man's act without a special, electing act of God's grace, and that God elects his people based upon foreseeing their future faith.**

1. Pope Innocent I excommunicated Pelagius in 417, but Pope Zosimus lifted the ban. He reinstated it in 418. Popes Boniface and Sixtus III rejected appeals from the Pelagians. Pelagius was cleared by a Jerusalem synod, and he was again acquitted at Diospolis (415), both in the East. However, two councils in Africa condemned him in 416 on the basis of his book on *Free Will*, and a synod of Antioch barred him from Palestine in 424. *NIDCC*, p. 761.

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