

The Unnamed Book(s) Of Coelestius

Reconstructed By Rev. Daniel R. Jennings, MA

Introduction: It seems uncertain just how many books Coelestius wrote or the names of them. Augustine mentions several works and tracts that he is familiar with (On The Grace of Christ, 32). These would include the book that he quoted during his hearing with Pope Zosimus (Ibid, 36), the book of his that was quoted at the Council of Diospolis (Lydda) against Pelagius, a book that Augustine mentions reading (Concerning Man's Perfection In Righteousness, Ch. 1), and a book which Jerome quoted from in his letter to Ctesiphon (Epistle 133). Whether these are one in the same is hard to say. Gennadius informs us that as a young man Coelestius "wrote to his parents three epistles On monastic life, written as short books, and containing moral maxims suited to every one who is seeking God (Supplement To Jerome's Lives of Illustrious Men, Ch. 45)."

I. The Book Quoted At The Council Of Diospolis (Lydda) Against Pelagius

Background: In his work "On The Proceedings Of Pelagius" Augustine of Hippo refers to a book "which bears no title of its author, but is commonly reported to be the work of Coelestius." This book was read at the Council of Diospolis against Pelagius and referred to as a work of Coelestius, though Pelagius himself appeared to not be familiar with the work stating that "Whether these are really the opinions of Coelestius or not" he could not say.

Chapter 1: "we do more than is commanded us in the law and the gospel."

Chapter 3: "God's grace and assistance is not given for single actions, but is imparted in the freedom of the will, or in the law and in doctrine...God's grace is given in proportion to our deserts; because, were He to give it to sinful persons, He would seem to be unrighteous... [From these words I infer that] therefore grace itself has been placed in my will, according as I have been either worthy or unworthy of it. For if we do all things by grace, then whenever we are overcome by sin, it is not we who are overcome, but God's grace, which wanted by all means to help us, but was not able...If, when we conquer sin, it is by the grace of God; then it is He who is in fault whenever we are conquered by sin, because He was either altogether unable or unwilling to keep us safe."

Chapter 5: "every individual has the ability to possess all powers and graces, thus taking away that 'diversity of graces', which the apostle teaches."

Chapter 6: "Men cannot be called sons of God, unless they have become entirely free from all sin."

Chapter 7: "Forgetfulness and ignorance have no connection with sin, as they do not happen through the will, but through necessity."

Chapter 10: "Our will is free, if it needs the help of God; inasmuch as every one in the possession of his proper will has either something to do or to abstain from doing."

Chapter 11: “[In the epistle of the blessed Apostle Peter we read that we might be] “partakers of the divine nature”...Now if our spirit or soul is Unable to be without sin, then even God is subject to sin, since this part of Him, that is to say, the soul, is exposed to sin...Now how can anybody become a partaker of the thing from the condition and power of which he is distinctly declared to be a stranger?”

Chapter 12: "Our victory comes not from God's help, but from our own free will...The victory is ours, seeing that we took up arms of our Own will; just as, on the other hand, being conquered is our own, since it was of our own will that we neglected to arm ourselves."

Chapter 13: "pardon is not given to penitents according to the grace and mercy of God, but according to their own merits and effort, since through repentance they have been worthy of mercy."

2. The Book Quoted By Jerome In His Letter To Ctesiphon

Background: In 415AD Jerome wrote a letter to Ctesiphon explaining his disagreements with Pelagius' theology. In it he quotes a work by "a disciple of Pelagius, or rather one who is the teacher and commander of his whole army," a clear reference to Coelestius. Jerome's letter to Ctesiphon is letter number 133 in his collected epistles.

"If I do nothing without the help of God and if all that I do is His act, I cease to labour and the crown that I shall win will belong not to me but to the grace of God. It is idle for Him to have given me the power of choice if I cannot use it without His constant help. For will that requires external support ceases to be will. God has given me freedom of choice, but what becomes of this if I cannot do as I wish?"

"Either once for all I use the power which is given to me, and so preserve the freedom of my will; or I need the help of another, in which case the freedom of my will is wholly abrogated."

"Suppose that I want to bend my finger or to move my hand, to sit, to stand, to walk, to run to and fro, to spit or to blow my nose, to perform the offices of nature; must the help of God be always indispensable to me?"

"To be sinless is one thing, to be able to be so is another. The first is not in our power, the second generally is. For though none ever has been sinless, yet, if a man wills to be so, he can be so."

3. The Book Presented To Pope Zosimus During His Hearing

Background: In 417 Coelestius was given the opportunity to defend himself before Pope Zosimus. At this meeting he explained his doctrinal beliefs and presented a written statement of faith and produced a book from which the following quotes are taken. These

fragments are from Augustine of Hippo's two part work entitled "On the Grace of Christ, and on Original Sin". After examining Coelestius and examining his writings Zosimus could find no fault with his theology and pronounced him to be orthodox in his faith.

1. "infants too are baptized for the remission of sins..."
2. "[but we deny] that they have any original sin."