

Ancient Church History

Augustine and Pelagianism

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Augustine's Time Period (The Church since the Second Ecumenical Council-381)

The Visigoths, Ostrogoths, Vandals and more remote Germanic tribes, such as the Burgundians and the Lombards had embraced the Arian faith and were invading the Roman Empire (ca. 376). After the death of Theodosius I in 395 (the Emperor who called the Council of Constantinople 381), the empire is split between his two sons and they are unable to resist the attacks of these tribes. Alaric I and the Visigoths plundered to the walls of Constantinople and moved all the way to Greece. In 410, Alaric I captures and sacks Rome.

Jerome (d. 420)

Jerome was one of the ablest scholars of the ancient Western Church. Born in 340 in Dalmatia (modern Croatia), he studied in Rome. He was overtaken with illness on a visit to Antioch (modern Turkey) where he believed Christ Himself appeared to him and reproached him for his devotion to the classics. He now turned solely to the study of the Scriptures, studying Hebrew, and living as a hermit from 373 to 379, not far from Antioch. He was ordained a presbyter in Antioch later in 379 and studied under Gregory of Nazianzus in Constantinople. In 382 he was in Rome with Pope Damasus (d.384), where he preached continually on the merits of the monastic life.

Jerome soon had a large following, but met with much trouble from the clergy because monasticism was not as yet popular in the West. He established monasteries and nunneries in Egypt and Bethlehem. He died in Bethlehem in 420. He was a translator of the Scriptures. He completed a New Testament translation under the supervision of Pope Damasus in 388. Jerome translated the Old Testament into Latin while in Bethlehem with the aid of Jewish friends (translated from Hebrew Masoretic text, not the Septuagint). The Vulgate was the result of his work and is still in use in the Roman Church as the official Latin translation of the Bible (*Nova Vulgata*). He wrote in support of Augustine against the teachings of Pelagius.

Ambrose (d. 397)

Elected Bishop of Milan in 374. Strongly pro-Nicene (Anti-Arian in theology) and would make no compromise with the Arians. His moral courage caused him to direct Emperor Theodosius I to manifest public repentance after he in quick temper ravaged Thessalonica because he was angry at the governor in 390; Theodosius obeyed the admonition. Ambrose was a theological writer that has been called by the Roman Church as "Doctor," or an authoritative teacher and was one of the most influential pastor-bishops of the fourth century. He contributed greatly to the development of Christian hymnology in the West. *"I will not glory because I am righteous, but I will glory because I am redeemed. I will not glory because I am free from sin, but because my sins are forgiven."* His famous book is "On the Holy Spirit".

Augustine of Hippo (354-430)

Born in Thagaste, in Numidia (Algeria-North Africa) on November 13, 354. Son of a heathen father named Patricius and a godly mother named Monica. He pursued the study of rhetoric in Carthage, North Africa at 17. He took a concubine for 14 years and had a son named Adeodatus in 372. He tried studying the Scriptures at 19 but found them "unworthy compared with the writings of Cicero." He turned for spiritual and intellectual comfort to the dualistic system known as Manichaeism for 9 years.

Augustine became a teacher of rhetoric in Milan in 384, the Western capital of the empire at this time. Augustine became drawn and fascinated by the teachings of Ambrose. He longed to sit under his preaching and described Ambrose as the "perfection of pulpit eloquence." He became filled with shame over his moral life and the fact that "ignorant men like monks could put away temptations which he, a man of learning, felt powerless to resist." Romans 13:13 was the verse of Scripture the Spirit of God used in his

conversion in 386 ("*Take up [the book], and Read it*" (*Tolle, lege*) Confessions, Book VIII, Chapter 12). In 387, he was baptized by Ambrose. He was ordained to the priesthood in 391 and became Bishop of Hippo in North Africa in 395. He died on August 28, 430, during the siege of Hippo by the Vandals. He wrote famously in his 'Confessions': "*Thou madest us for Thyself, and our heart is restless until it repose in Thee.*"

For Memorization

Original Sin

Monergism

Synergism

Soteriology

"Posse Pecarre, Posse Non Pecarre"

Books by Augustine: Confessions: "Command what you will; give what you command." (397-398)/ "Against the Donatists": "In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in everything charity."/ City of God (completed and published 426)/ On Christian Doctrine (397-426)/Retractions (ca. 426-428)

Augustine's Doctrines of Grace- "Command what thy will; and give what thy command."

Salvation comes by God's grace, which is wholly undeserved, and is wholly free as a gift of a sovereign God. Adam's sin and subsequent fall affected all of Adam's posterity (Doctrine of Original Sin).

Augustine taught that grace comes to those to whom God chooses to send it (from Romans 9 and Ephesians 1-2). He predestinates whom He will "to punishment and salvation." Grace is irresistible and man cannot reject God's call. Grace after conversion frees the enslaved will to choose that which is pleasing to God, "not only in order that they may know, by the manifestation of that grace, what should be done, but moreover in order that, by its enabling, they may do with love what they know."

Through us, God does good works (cf. Eph. 2:8-10), which He rewards as if they were men's own and to which He ascribes merit. The Sacraments are signs of spiritual realities, rather than the realities themselves. They are essential; but the truths to which they witness are, whenever received, the work of divine grace.

Who was Pelagius? (ca. 354-420)

Pelagius was a British monk, a very zealous preacher who was castrated for the sake of the kingdom and given to rigorous asceticism. He desired to live a life of perfect holiness. In Christian history, he has come to be the arch-heretic of the church, but in his early writings he was very orthodox and sought to maintain and uphold the creeds of the early church.

Pelagius came from Rome to Carthage in the year 410 AD (after Alaric I had captured Rome) with his friend and student Celestius. He taught the people of North Africa a new emphasis on morals and the rigorous life of living the Gospel, because he was shocked by the low tone of Roman morals and thought that Augustine's teaching on divine grace contributed to the immorality. Celestius, who was the most prominent follower of Pelagius at the time, was condemned at the Council of Carthage in 411 because he denied the transmission of Adam's sins to his descendants.

Augustine began to write and preach against Pelagius and Celestius' doctrines. Pelagius and Celestius were condemned at two councils at Carthage and Milevis (Numidia, North Africa) in 416 and Innocent I (410-17) excommunicated them from the church. On May 1, 418 the Council of Carthage convened to issue a

series of nine canons affirming without compromise the Augustinian doctrine of the Fall and Original Sin. Emperor Honorius (395-423) issued an imperial decree denouncing the teachings of Pelagius and Celestius in that same year. Pelagius disappeared from history and is thought to have died in 420 AD. After Pelagius' disappearance and death, Celestius and Julian of Eclanum (ca. 386-454) debated Augustine until his Augustine's death in 430, and Pelagianism was condemned again at the Council of Ephesus in 431.

Pelagius' Doctrines of Sin and Grace

Pelagius was essentially a legalist and moralist who thought that the teachings of Augustine, which he had heard taught and preached in Rome, cheapened grace and gave men the ability to live a life that they pleased, without much respect for the commands of God.

Pelagius believed in the power of the human will. "*If I ought, I can*" summarizes his understanding of how God's grace comes to man by faith (in other words, if God commands us to do something, we must be able to perform as God has commanded- -this rejects the biblical doctrine of Original Sin). Pelagius taught that "As often as I have to speak of the principles of virtue and a holy life, I am accustomed first of all to call attention to the capacity and character of human nature and to show what it is able to accomplish; then from this to arouse the feelings of the hearer, that he may strive after different kinds of virtue."

Pelagius wrote: "*Self acquired virtue is the supreme good which is followed by reward," or as a basic thesis: "Justification by the person's own good works."*

Pelagius denied Original Sin inherited from Adam (cf. Romans 5:12-21; Psalm 51), and affirmed that all men now have the power not to sin. Adam's sin merely set an ill example and many have been quick to follow.

Pelagius' position on Original Sin is stated in this way, "Adam is created mortal and would have died even if he had never sinned." Augustine said, "Adam was created good and upright, he was happy and in communion with God... Adam would not have died if he had not sinned but that he was on trial, and when he failed his depravity was communicated to his offspring throughout history so that the Old and New Testaments speak of man's depravity from Genesis to Revelation." (Genesis 6; Psalm 51; Jer. 17:9; John 6:44; Matt. 15; Eph. 1; Romans 3:11-23).

Augustine and Pelagius' Theological Debate

Augustine argued against Pelagius that Adam was "posse peccare," "posse non peccare." He had the ability to sin and the ability *to not sin* before the fall, but since the fall in his disobedience, death came through Adam in his sin (Gen.3; Romans 5:12-21). Adam was on trial and chosen by God to represent the human race, therefore because of his failure and disobedience to God, Adam's offspring are born in sin (Ps. 51), with the inability *to not sin*.

Augustine taught that man still has freewill (*liberium arbitrium*), but his will is in bondage to the sinful nature and he cannot do what is godly, only that which fallen man desires, which is never focused godward (Romans 8:9; 1 Cor. 2; John 6:44).

Augustine wrote, "*Adam fell into a state of total and hopeless ruin, of which the proper ending is eternal death.*" Many Church theologians would agree with this doctrine articulated by Augustine, and these Augustinian doctrines would be repeated in the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas in his Summa Theologiae, Luther's Bondage of the Will, and John Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion.

Original sin, according to Augustine was not the first sin committed by Adam in the garden but the consequence of his disobedience, or the lack of good, the condition of sinfulness that is common to mankind since the fall- an inherent, inherited sinful corruption and condition that makes it impossible for man to not sin. It was the loss of libertas, which was the loss of true moral liberty as defined by Augustine.

Pelagius argued with Augustine that God would not command us in the Law to live a particular way if he did not also give us this ability. He wrote to Augustine that Adam represented Adam *only* and that man cannot be placed on trial because of someone else. "Adam's sin merely set an ill example, which [man] has been quick to follow. Hence they almost all need to be set right...but after baptism man has full power and duty to keep the divine law."

This belief logically brings Pelagius to the conclusion that justification in vicarious atonement cannot be true either, because another man cannot represent the punishment of someone else's sins.

Man is responsible for the keeping of the law and his resistance to sin by himself. The obvious sinfulness in man in the fallen creation must have an ability to not sin, it is only that they tend to sin because we are born in a society where evil prevails. Men are born innocent, but the society that is evil seems to prevail upon them causing them to be bad. Augustine asked him, "How can society be evil when made up of men that are not fallen, because society should not be evil, but good if men are born good?!"

Pelagius was much like Socrates in his teaching of education and knowledge being the foundation of righteousness. Moral problems can be solved and evil can be done away with merely through education, Pelagius would say. Augustine responded that we would only end with sophisticated, educated crooks and that man is by nature sinful and fallen and only God's Grace can make the evil heart of man good. Augustine defined evil, rather than ignorance, as the absence of the good, the godly.

Pelagius said that Christ came to educate man and bring him knowledge of God and his condition. His death was only an example of the evil-ness of sin, rather than a vicarious atonement where Christ's righteousness is applied to His people.

Augustine wrote that mankind is a mass of sin (*missa perditionis*). He was what theologians in the Church have called a true Pauline theologian. One Protestant theologian from Princeton even said that **Augustine "Gave us the Reformation of the 16th century, because of his strong emphasis on the grace of God in salvation."** He built his foundation on the Apostle Paul when he had written "there is none righteous, no not one...no one who seeks after God or does good..." from his letter to the Romans in the New Testament.

The great commandment of God according to Christ was "To love the Lord thy God with all thy strength, mind, and heart, and love one another as yourself." Augustine believed that the most gross and heinous of sins was unbelief, not merely "To hate the Lord thy God with all thy strength, mind and heart, and to hate another even though you love yourself."

Augustine wrote that many see heinous sins and crimes as merely murder, adultery, and other outwardly visible sins, but that the greatest and most heinous of crimes are those which are not visible, namely unbelief or the dishonoring of God's commandments. It was not God's fault that man sinned against him, because man was tested in a perfect environment in the garden in perfect circumstances but with mutability, the ability to change: **posse peccare** the ability to sin if he chose to do so, his nature at this point in time being neutral.

Man is now born with a condition which prevents him from fully obeying God (or the loss of *libertas*: moral liberty), thus doing the ultimate good and keeping the great commandment; therefore, only God by his grace can provide the ability to *not* sin. God provides this grace to a certain number of people within the Church as he did to Israel, a particular nation in the Old Testament (Deut. 7:7).

Augustine clearly articulated that God does command what man cannot do because of the fall of man into sin and misery. Augustine taught that because of this inborn nature and freewill to do only that which is evil and not godly, then man was by nature an object of wrath, as Paul had taught in the letter to Ephesians (Chapter 2), and in his letter to the Romans (Chapter 3 and 8).

The gospel or good news taught all sinners that Christ came to "set the captives free" by living a perfect life in sinful man's stead, and dying, taking the wrath of God upon himself although innocent, and applying his righteousness to a particular people. Augustine wrote: "...man's good deserts are themselves the gift of God, so that when these obtain the recompense of eternal life, it is simply grace given for grace."

Augustine has been called the theologian of grace in history because of his writings in soteriology (or on the study of salvation), and the establishing of an orthodox position on God's giving of grace to sinful man. He never denied man's freewill; rather he established it. He denied that according to the Apostle Paul and Christ's teaching, he was unable to be totally free in righteousness; thus, he had no ability to live perfectly righteous. Man was still free, but free to do only that which is evil. By the grace of God, in the infusion of love by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5), the enslaved will chooses that which is pleasing to God, "not only in order that they may know, by the manifestation of that grace, what should be done, but moreover in order that, by its enabling, they may do with love what they know."

According to Christ's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, a tree is either good or evil at root. You know the tree by the fruit it bears, or to make this a human analogy: that which is born of flesh is flesh and that which is born of the spirit is spirit. Paul wrote that man is at enmity with God, fallen and under the wrath of God, children of the devil.

Augustine concludes his arguments for his statement "*Command what thou desirest; and give what thou commandest,*" by stressing that if Pelagius disagrees with him, he has to disagree with the teachings of Christ. Christ taught that "no man can come to him unless it is given by the father," "be perfect as my father in heaven is perfect," "The Spirit gives life, the flesh profits nothing...without me you can do nothing" (John 6; Matt.5).

Council of Ephesus (431)

Pelagianism is officially condemned as a teaching of the Church in April 418 AD by Western Emperor Honorius at Council of Carthage. The Pelagians were exiled for holding to these unbiblical doctrines. In May 418, the Council of Carthage proclaimed that Adam became mortal by sin, that children should be baptized for the remission of original sin, that grace was necessary for right living, and that sinlessness is impossible in this life.

The Church issued a circular letter stating this Augustinian view and condemning internationally the Pelagian understanding of original sin. Pelagius died sometime before 420 AD, but his teaching did not die with him. Despite the fact that his teachings were condemned, they continued to be propagated by his students posthumously.

Because of the continuation in the Church of these teachings, the final, official condemnation of Pelagianism came in **431 AD at the Third General Council in Ephesus**. The council passed eight canons, the first seven dealing with matters arising out of doctrinal controversies of Celestius and Nestorius.

Pelagianism was therefore condemned by church councils in the East and the West and has been condemned by more church councils in history than any other heresy. Pelagianism, thus officially rejected in the West and the East, lived on in less extreme forms, and has always represented a tendency in the theological thinking of the church.

Comparisons	Pelagius	Augustine
Effect of Fall	Only Adam affected	All humanity affected
Original sin	No	Yes
Hereditary sin	No	Yes
Humans at birth	Born Neutral	Born with fallen nature
Man's will	Free	Enslaved to sin
Fact of universal sin	Due to bad examples	Due to man's innate sinfulness: <i>posse non peccare</i> - man is "not able to not sin."
Turning to God in salvation	Is possible independent of God's grace	Only possible through God's grace

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