

## CHURCH HISTORY (9): Augustine and the Pelagians

As with the Donatist controversy, the Pelagian controversy began in the West and resulted in several important writings by Augustine. "If the Donatist controversy called forth the churchman in Augustine, the Pelagian debate evoked his emphases on salvation by grace" (Shelley).<sup>1</sup> "The Pelagian controversy left a fabulously rich legacy of writings from Augustine in which he set out his understanding of sin and salvation" (Needham).<sup>2</sup>

### I. Augustine and the Pelagians

1. *The rise of Pelagianism.* "Pelagius was a simple monk, born about the middle of the fourth century in Britain, the extremity of the then civilized world. He was a man of clear intellect, mild disposition, learned culture, and spotless character; even Augustine speaks respectfully of the man. But his morality was not so much the rich, deep life of faith, as it was the external legalism, the ascetic self-discipline and self-righteousness of monkery" (Schaff).<sup>3</sup> Pelagius moved to Rome in 384, where he quickly became known for his learning and persuasive teaching. While in Rome, he encountered gross immorality tolerated in the church. "It was in Rome, he had his first encounter with Augustine's theology, against which he reacted violently because it made everything dependent on God's grace and seemed to leave no place for human effort and participation" (Gonzalez).<sup>4</sup> "In the depths of his sadness and disgust, Pelagius's mission in life dawned on him as though from heaven: he was to be an apostle of sanctity to his fellow Christians. Inflamed by this thrilling and compelling vision, Pelagius gathered a group of disciples in Rome, taught them, and guided them into his own conception of a pure spiritual life. Others caught his vision, and the Pelagian movement grew" (Needham).<sup>5</sup>

Pelagius was shocked by what he found at Rome. Now that Christianity was the official religion of the empire, congregations had swelled enormously, but the dedication and fervor of the faithful had been diluted. He felt that people were lax. But worse, people justified moral looseness theologically. Some theologians were arguing that human beings, since Adam, are intrinsically sinful. 'Original sin' meant not only that people have a tendency to do wrong but that they cannot help doing it. Moreover, everything takes place within God's providence. If God determines that you will be saved and live a moral life, you will do so – but if He does not, you cannot do it by yourself. Therefore, why try?<sup>6</sup>

"Around 405 Pelagius reacted negatively to a text he found in Augustine's *Confessions*. Augustine had written, 'Command what you will, but grant what you command.' He was essentially saying, 'Lord, You have the right to make any moral precept you want; but then You must provide the help we need to keep Your commands.' In other words, Augustine believed no one can please God apart from a prior and distinct work of grace" (Litfin).<sup>7</sup> "Pelagius rejected this 'miserable sinner Christianity' (as it would later come to be known). He felt that it undermined human responsibility. As a result, he downplayed the impact of original sin and total depravity. After all, had he not himself achieved considerable levels of devotion and obedience" (Ferguson)?<sup>8</sup> After Rome was sacked in 410 (by an army of tribal Germans

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce Shelley, *Church History*, 137

<sup>2</sup> Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:277

<sup>3</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:790

<sup>4</sup> Justo Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought*, 1:29-30

<sup>5</sup> Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:275-276

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Hill, *History of Christianity*, 89

<sup>7</sup> Bryan Litfin, *Getting to Know the Church Fathers*, 223

<sup>8</sup> Sinclair Ferguson, *In the Year of our Lord*, 53

called Visigoths), Pelagius and his "most enthusiastic disciple, an upper-class ex-lawyer named Celestius, fled to North-West Africa" (Needham).<sup>9</sup> "He then left Africa for the East, without having had the occasion to meet Augustine. But Celestius, who was less moderate than his teacher, remained behind to be the main opponent of Augustin in the Pelagian controversy" (Gonzalez).<sup>10</sup> While in the East, Pelagius came face to face with Jerome (347-420). Jerome overseen a monastery in Bethlehem, and was a strong ally of Augustine and opponent of Pelagius. "This provoked the Pelagians of Palestine to bitter hostility against Jerome; in 416, a Pelagians mob attacked and burnt down his monastery in Bethlehem, forcing the aged Jerome to flee and remain in hiding for two years" (Needham).<sup>11</sup> It was while in Palestine, Pelagius wrote several important works such as, *In Defense of Free Will* and *On the Nature of Man*, in which he charged Augustine and Jerome with pagan fatalism. Pelagius remained in Palestine until his death in 418.

2. *The spread of Pelagianism.* Pelagius attracted two influential disciples while in Rome, Celestius and Julian. Both of these men took Pelagius' views further than Pelagius. "That these three men present a progressive development cannot be denied. The practical ideas of Pelagius are followed by the doctrinal formulation of Celestius, and the conceptions of Julian. Both go beyond Pelagius" (Seeberg).<sup>12</sup> (1) Celestius. Celestius became a disciple of Pelagius at Rome. He left for North Africa in 410 (along with Pelagius), with hopes of becoming a bishop in Carthage. He was strongly opposed by Paulinus, a deacon in the Carthage church, who encouraged the church to call a council in 411. Celestius fled before the council met (at which his teaching was condemned), and he relocated to Ephesus, where he became a bishop. "It was from Celestius, young, more skillful in argument, more ready for controversy, and more rigorously consistent than his teacher, that the controversy took its rise" (Schaff).<sup>13</sup> The council in Carthage met in 412, where Celestius was charged with heresy on several accounts: he believed Adam's fall injured himself alone, not the human race; children come into the world in the same condition in which Adam was before the fall; the human race neither dies in consequence of Adam's fall, nor rises again in consequence of Christ's resurrection.<sup>14</sup> "Celestius refused to recant the errors charged upon him, and the synod excluded him from the communion of the church. He immediately went to Ephesus, and was there ordained presbyter" (Schaff).<sup>15</sup>

(2) Julian (386-454). Julian was the bishop of a small village in Italy (Eclanum). "Julian was the most learned, the most acute, and the most systematic of the Pelagians, and the most formidable opponent of Augustine" (Schaff).<sup>16</sup> Having been exiled from Italy (418), Cilicia (422), he fled to Constantinople in 429. "Julian, Celestius, and other Pelagian leaders were received in Constantinople, in 429, by the patriarch Nestorius, who sympathized with their doctrine of the moral ability of the will, though not with their denial of original sin" (Schaff).<sup>17</sup> "At the third ecumenical council in Ephesus in 431 (the year after Augustine's death), the teaching of the Pelagians was put in the same category with Nestorius (who taught another heresy that concerned the person of Christ). In the canons, Celestius is twice condemned together with Nestorius, but without statement of his teachings" (Schaff).<sup>18</sup> Augustine wrote a treatise against Julian in 428, entitled, *Against Julian*, that was very influential in the judgment of the council. In addition to this, "it was against the doctrines of the Pelagians that Augustine wrote some of

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<sup>9</sup> Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:276

<sup>10</sup> Justo Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought*, 1:30

<sup>11</sup> Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:267

<sup>12</sup> Reinhold Seeberg, *Text-Book of the History of Doctrines*, 1:323-333

<sup>13</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:792

<sup>14</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:793

<sup>15</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:793

<sup>16</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:800

<sup>17</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:800

<sup>18</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:801

his most significant works" (Gonzalez).<sup>19</sup> Among them are: *On the Guilt and Forgiveness of sins* (412); *On the Spirit and the Letter* (413); *On Nature and Grace* (415); *On the Acts of Pelagius* (417); *On the Grace of Christ, and Original Sin* (418); *On the Soul and Its Origin* (419); *On Grace and Free Will* (426); *On Discipline and Grace* (427); *On the Predestination of the Saints* (428); *On the Gift of Perseverance* (429).

3. *The beliefs of Pelagianism.* "Pelagius and his immediate followers do not seem to have called in question the doctrine of the Trinity, or any of the scriptural doctrines more immediately connected with it" (Cunningham).<sup>20</sup> "Although Pelagius' doctrine of God was Catholic enough (he believed in the Nicene doctrine of the Trinity), his beliefs about human nature sparked off a storm of controversy which ended in his condemnation for heresy" (Needham).<sup>21</sup> The controversy largely concerned the doctrines of man (anthropology) and salvation (soteriology). "Before Augustine the anthropology of the church was exceedingly crude and unspecified. There was a general agreement as to the apostasy and the moral accountability of man, the terrible curse of sin, and the necessity of redeeming grace; but not as to the extent of native corruption, and the relation of human *freedom* to divine *grace* in the work of regeneration and conversion" (Schaff).<sup>22</sup> "The most important questions in debate between Pelagius and Augustine were those of free will and original sin" (Berkhof).<sup>23</sup>

The Pelagian controversy turns upon the mighty antithesis of sin and grace. It embraces the whole cycle of doctrine respecting the ethical and religious relation of man to God, and includes, therefore, the doctrines of human freedom, of the primitive state, of the fall, of regeneration and conversion, of the eternal purpose of redemption, and of the nature and operation of the grace of God. It comes at last to the question, whether redemption is chiefly a work of God or of man; whether man needs to be born anew, or merely improved. The soul of the Pelagian system is human freedom; the soul of the Augustinian is divine grace.<sup>24</sup>

The struggle with Pelagianism was thus in reality a struggle for the very foundations of Christianity; and even more dangerously than in the previous theological and Christological controversies, here the practical substance of Christianity was in jeopardy. The real question at issue was whether there was any need for Christianity at all; whether by his own power man might not attain eternal felicity; whether the function of Christianity was to save, or only to render an eternity of happiness more easily attainable by man. And so, the very heart of Pelagianism lies in the assumption of the unlimited ability of man; his ability to do all that righteousness can demand—to work out not only his own salvation, but also his own perfection. This is the core of the whole theory; and all the other claims not only depend upon it, but arise out of it. Both chronologically and logically this is the root of the system.<sup>25</sup>

(1) Man is born neutral. For Pelagius, Adam's sin relates to his posterity only as an example. Man is not born morally corrupt, but neutral as was Adam. Every man faces a similar choice as did Adam and Eve. "There is no hereditary transmission of a sinful nature or of guilt, and consequently no such thing as original sin. Man is still born in the same condition in which Adam was before the fall. Not only is

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<sup>19</sup> Justo Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought*, 1:33

<sup>20</sup> William Cunningham, *Historical Theology*, 1:329

<sup>21</sup> Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:276

<sup>22</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:785-786

<sup>23</sup> Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines*, 132

<sup>24</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:787

<sup>25</sup> B.B. Warfield, *Works*, 4:291-292

he free from guilt but also from pollution" (Berkhof).<sup>26</sup> "Pelagius, destitute of all idea of the organic wholeness of the race or of human nature, viewed Adam merely as an isolated individual; he gave him no representative place, and therefore his acts had no bearing beyond himself. There is, therefore, according to this system, no *original sin*, and no *hereditary guilt*. Pelagius merely conceded, that Adam, by his disobedience, set a bad example, which exerts a more or less injurious influence upon his posterity" (Schaff). Thus, for Pelagius, "Adam was born mortal, and would have died, whether he had sinned or not sinned. The sin of Adam injured only himself, and not the human race. Children who are now born are in the state in which Adam was before the fall. Neither does the whole human race die through the death or fall of Adam, nor does the whole human race arise from the dead through the resurrection of Christ" (Seeberg).<sup>27</sup>

Pelagius denied that human sin is inherited from Adam. Man, he said, is free to act righteously or sinfully. Moreover, death is not a consequence of Adam's disobedience. Adam, indeed, introduced sin into the world, but only by his corrupting example. There is no direct connection between his sin and the moral condition of mankind. Almost all the human race has sinned; but it is possible not to sin, and some people have in fact lived without sin.<sup>28</sup>

"Against Pelagius and Celestius, Augustine argued that the entire human race was mysteriously present in Adam, the head of humankind; when he sinned and fell, humanity itself sinned and fell in him. As a result, every human being is born into the world with a sinful nature. This is called 'original sin' (Needham).<sup>29</sup> Thus, for Augustine, and Scripture, original sin refers to the original guilt and corruption that all men receive from their union with Adam. (a) Original guilt. "Even if there were in men nothing but original sin, it would be sufficient for their condemnation. For however much heavier will be their condemnation who have added their own sins to the original offense; still, even that sin alone which was originally derived unto men not only excludes from the kingdom of God, but also alienates from salvation and everlasting life" (Augustine).<sup>30</sup> (b) Original corruption. "Man's nature was created at first faultless and without any sin; but that nature of man in which everyone is born from Adam, now needs the Physician, because it is not sound. All good qualities, no doubt, which it still possesses in its make, life, senses, intellect, it has of the Most High God, its Creator and Maker. But the flaw, which darkens and weakens all those natural goods, so that it has need of illumination and healing, it has not contracted from its blameless Creator, but from that original sin" (Augustine).<sup>31</sup>

In 412, Augustine wrote his first treatise against Pelagius called, *On the Guilt and Forgiveness of Sins, and Infant Baptism*. It consisted of two Books. The first Book contained three basic arguments in proof of original sin. First, the universal reign of sin and death in the world. Philip Schaff summarized Augustine's view: "The inclination to evil awakes with the awaking of consciousness and voluntary activity. Even the sucking gives signs of self-will, spite, and disobedience. As moral development advances, the man feels this disposition to be really bad, and worthy of punishment, not a mere limitation of defect. Thus we find even the child subject to suffering, to sickness, and to death."<sup>32</sup> Second, the testimony of Romans 5:12-21 (and esp. v12 – "Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned"). For Augustine, "death" includes guilt and corruption, and is passed to all men, because all men sinned in Adam. "Whoever

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<sup>26</sup> Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines*, 132

<sup>27</sup> Reinhold Seeberg, *Text-Book of the History of Doctrines*, 1:337-338

<sup>28</sup> Bruce Shelley, *Church History*, 138

<sup>29</sup> Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:277

<sup>30</sup> Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 5:20-21

<sup>31</sup> Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 5:122

<sup>32</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:785-786

maintains that human nature at any period required not the second Adam for its physician, because it was not corrupted in the first Adam, is convicted as an enemy to the grace of God. For from the fall of man and following, men have been sunk in so many intolerable sins. From the moment, then, 'by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin, and so death passed upon all men, in whom all sinned,' the entire mass of our humanity was ruined beyond doubt, and fell into the possession of its destroyer (Satan). And from him no one – no, not one – has been delivered, or is being delivered, or ever will be delivered, except by the grace of the Redeemer" (Augustine).<sup>33</sup> Third, the fact that all men need baptism (even infants). This is the last and lengthiest part of Book 1 (chapters 21-70). His basic point is this: the fact that all men need baptism, even infants, proves that all men, by nature, are affected with original sin. Thus, Augustine doesn't seek to prove infant baptism, but merely assumes it as it was believed to remove original sin.

And from this we gather that we have derived from Adam, in whom we all have sinned, not all our actual sins, but only original sin; whereas from Christ, in whom we are all justified, we obtain the remission not merely of that original sin, but of the rest of our sins also, which we have added. Hence it runs: *But the free gift is not like the offense* (Rom.5:15-16). For the judgment, certainly, from one sin, if it is not remitted – which is original sin – is capable of drawing us into condemnation; while grace conducts us to justification from the remission of many sins – that is to say, not simply from the original sin, but from all others also whatsoever.<sup>34</sup>

(2) Man has free will. For Pelagius, since man is natively good, there exists in him an ability for good or evil. "Pelagius, and his immediate followers, Celestius and Julian, taught openly and explicitly that man's moral character had received no injury from the fall, and that men were born now with as much ability to do the will of God, and to discharge all the obligations incumbent upon them, as Adam" (Cunningham).<sup>35</sup> Thus, for the Pelagians, all men are born neutral, just as Adam was created. This means they possess, as did Adam, the native ability to choose good or evil. "According to Pelagius, Adam, as he was created by God, was not endowed with positive holiness. His original condition was one of neutrality, neither holy nor sinful, but with a capacity for both good and evil" (Berkhof).<sup>36</sup> "According to Pelagius and his disciples, every human being is born in the same state as Adam before the fall, free to choose good and gain eternal life or sin and eternal death" (Horton).<sup>37</sup> "Now we have implanted in us by God a capacity for either part (good or evil). It resembles, as I may say, a fruitful root which yields and produces diversely according to the will of man, and which is capable, at the planter's own choice, of either shedding a beautiful bloom of virtues, or of bristling with the thorny thickets of vices" (Pelagius).<sup>38</sup>

According to Pelagius, there are no evil tendencies and desires in man's nature which inevitably result in sin. The only difference between him and Adam is that he has the evil example before him. Sin does not consist in wrong affections or desires, but only in the separate acts of the will. It depends in every case on the voluntary choice of man. As a matter of fact, man need not sin. He is, like Adam, endowed with perfect freedom of the will, with a liberty of choice or of indifference, so that he can, at any given moment, choose either good or evil. And the very fact that God commands man to do what

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<sup>33</sup> Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 5:122

<sup>34</sup> Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Augustine, 5:20

<sup>35</sup> William Cunningham, *Historical Theology*, 1:329

<sup>36</sup> Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines*, 132

<sup>37</sup> Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 561

<sup>38</sup> Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, as quoted by Augustine, 5:224

is good is proof positive that he is able to do it. His responsibility is the measure of his ability. If notwithstanding this, sin is universal – and Pelagius admits that it is – this is due only to wrong education, to bad example, and to a long-established habit of sinning.<sup>39</sup>

For Augustine, though not forced, man's will is enslaved. Warfield summarized Augustine's view: "According to the character of a man, will the use of the free will be. If the man be holy, he will make a holy use of it, and if he be corrupt, he will make a sinful use of it. The last is the present condition of men by nature." In other words, man always chooses in harmony to his nature. If the nature is good, his choices will be good, but if his nature is bad, his choices will be bad. "Augustine taught that God so changes the will that man voluntarily chooses that which is good. The will of man is renewed and thus restored to its true freedom. God can and does so operate on the will that man of his own free choice turns to virtue and holiness. In this way the grace of God becomes the source of all good in man" (Berkhof).<sup>40</sup> Thus, while maintaining God's sovereignty, Augustine preserves man's responsibility, as he always acts freely and in accordance to his nature. "No man, therefore, when he sins, can in his heart blame God for it, but every man must impute the fault to himself. Nor does it detract at all from a man's own will when he performs any act in accordance with God. Indeed, a work is then to be pronounced a good one when a person does it willingly; then, too, may the reward of a good work be hoped for from Him concerning whom it is written, 'He shall reward every man according to his works'" (Augustine).<sup>41</sup>

(3) Man is saved by works. "For Pelagianism, salvation is a matter chiefly of following Christ instead of Adam, rather than being transferred from the condemnation and corruption of Adam's race and place 'in Christ,' clothed in His righteousness and made alive by His grace. What men and women need is moral direction, not a new birth; therefore, Pelagius saw salvation in purely naturalistic terms – the progress of human nature from sinful behavior to holy behavior, by following Christ's example" (Horton). "If human nature is uncorrupted, and the natural will competent to all good, we need no Redeemer to create in us a new will and a new life, but merely an improver and ennobler; and salvation is essentially the work of man. The Pelagian system has really no place for the idea of redemption, atonement, regeneration, and new creation" (Schaff).<sup>42</sup>

In contrast to this, Augustine believed salvation was from beginning to end all of grace. (a) Grace is necessary. Augustine defined grace as, "assistance or help from God." This help was twofold: *operating* or *cooperating*. "That is, it was either the grace that first enables the will to choose the good (operating), or the grace that cooperates with the already enabled will to do the good. It is, therefore, also called *prevenient* or *subsequent* grace" (Warfield).<sup>43</sup> "God operates, therefore, without us, in order that we may will; but when we will, and so will that we may act, He co-operates with us. We can, however, ourselves do nothing to effect good works of piety without Him either working that we may will, or co-working when we will. Now, concerning His working that we may will, it is said: 'It is God which works in you, to will and do according to His good pleasure' (Augustine).<sup>44</sup> (b) Grace is unmerited. "The Holy Spirit breathes where He will, and does not follow merits, but Himself produces the merits. For the grace of God will in no wise exist unless it be wholly free" (Augustine).<sup>45</sup> (c) Grace is effectual. Augustine distinguished between a universal and effectual call (the latter being irresistible).

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<sup>39</sup> Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines*, 133

<sup>40</sup> Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines*, 135

<sup>41</sup> Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 5:445

<sup>42</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:785

<sup>43</sup> B.B. Warfield, *Works*, 4:291-292

<sup>44</sup> Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 5:445

<sup>45</sup> Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 5:445