

AUGUSTINE–PELAGIAN CONTROVERSY

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Abstract — The Augustine–Pelagian controversy deals with the topics of human will, grace, and salvation. Pelagius claimed that humankind was capable of deciding between good and evil and that salvation was something a person achieves by their own choosing. Augustine claimed that humankind were slaves to sin and could not choose to do anything except what was evil. Salvation was not something a person could choose for themselves. God must first give that person grace for them to have the ability to choose what is good. The controversy did not end in the 5th century but has sprung up multiple times throughout history and continues to be an ongoing debate in Christendom today.

General Research Topic(s) — Augustine, Pelagius, Christian History, salvation (soteriology), sin (hamartiology), grace, election.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the early 5th century of the Christian church, there arose an important controversy within the church that involved two diverging figures – Pelagius, a British ascetic monk, and Augustine, most famously known as the bishop of Hippo. The controversy centered on the nature of the human will and its relation to sin. Some questions surrounding the controversy were: Can a person choose not to sin? Is grace necessary for a person to do good? What part does a person’s will play in their conversion? And is salvation initially an act by the divine or human will? While Augustine and Pelagius agreed upon certain aspects involved in answering these questions, they had considerable differences in their foundational understanding of the human will and the

function of grace in the process of salvation. Nonetheless, Augustine and Pelagius were significant figures in the church at the beginning of the Middle Ages and this controversy rests as a milestone in the ongoing conflict surrounding the formation of Christian doctrine. This paper will discuss the positions of Augustine and Pelagius and their view of the human will with regard to salvation. Two specific works of these theologians will be compared to give an understanding of their respective positions and beliefs: Augustine’s *The Spirit and the Letter*, and Pelagius’ *Letter to Demetrias*.

II. PELAGIUS

While living in Rome, Pelagius was actively involved in teaching and exhorting Christians to live a righteous and holy life. His teachings were aimed at pointing out godly conduct versus evil conduct. As a monk, Pelagius was a strong proponent of a rigorous lifestyle, and therefore, he was highly devoted to controlling his personal conduct and doing only those things which were good to do. The controversy could be said to have first sprouted when Pelagius read a certain prayer of Augustine: “Oh God, grant what Thou commandest, and command what Thou dost will.”¹ Pelagius did not agree with Augustine and he became passionate about speaking out against such a notion.

¹ Aug. *Conf.* 10.40.

As a pious and ascetic monk, Pelagius believed that the Christian life consisted of a continued struggle with oneself to overcome sin and attain salvation according to one's will in choosing good over evil. Thus, Augustine's prayer seemed like it undermined the Christian understanding of the human will and the role of personal choice in pursuing salvation. In other words, Pelagius saw Augustine's affirmation for God to grant what he commands as an overriding of human volition to *choose* to do what God commands. It is helpful to understand Pelagius' position by knowing that his philosophical tendencies and worldview were derived from Origen and the idea of the perfectibility of the soul. In Pelagius' reckoning, within each person is a determinate will that is free to do that which it desires. Thus, to Pelagius, "what mattered was the potentiality of man, his freedom to choose good, and the marvelous virtues with which God had endowed him, sometimes buried deep but waiting to be unearthed."²

In his *Letter to Demetrias*, Pelagius conveys to Demetrias, who was a wealthy and pious woman, how it is insensible to think that God has asked anything of humankind of which it is impossible for a person to comply. Pelagius asserted that for God "to call a person to something he considers impossible does him [the person] no good."³ He also concluded along this line of reasoning that if God's commandments were too heavy to bear, then it must be that God has been seeking not so much humankind's salvation but apparently their condemnation. As Pelagius writes,

"We accuse the Lord of all knowledge of being doubly ignorant. We assert that he does not understand what he made and does not realize what he commands. We imply that the creator of humanity has forgotten its weakness and imposes precepts which a human being cannot bear. At the

² Paul Johnson, *A History of Christianity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1976), 118.

³ Pelag., *Ep. Dem.* 2.

*same time, moreover, we impiously charge the just God with wickedness and the loving God with cruelty. First we complain that he commands the impossible; then we assume that he condemns people for things they cannot avoid. We portray God as working to condemn rather than save us, something it is sacrilegious even to suggest.'*⁴

According to Pelagius, it cannot be that God has asked of humankind something which they cannot possibly fulfill. Pelagius' argument is that God's commandments have to be performable. Otherwise, why would God ask us to do things which cannot be done? In Pelagius' perspective, every person has a direct and active role in choosing what they will do – whether good or bad. A person's behavior is a result of their deliberate decisions to act in certain ways. In Pelagius' words,

*"We do, however, refute the charge that nature's inadequacy forces us to do evil. We do either good or evil only by our own will; since we always remain capable of both, we are always free to do either."*⁵

Therefore, humans are afforded a reason and a conscience and the capacity to follow both. To further make his point Pelagius says,

*"[Humankind is] capable by nature of turning in either direction, with a genuine capacity for good and evil. There could be no sense in speaking of a man's virtue if he did not possess freedom of deliberate choice; our nature is not bound to a necessity either of sinning or of immutable goodness."*⁶

With freedom to follow either path, Pelagius sees God ordaining the human will as a means to make them

⁴ Pelag., *Ep. Dem.* 16.

⁵ Pelag., *Ep. Dem.* 8.

⁶ Huber Cunliffe-Jone, ed., *A History of Christian Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 158-59.

responsible for that which they do. As Pelagius describes,

*“[free will] removes the bonds of necessity and makes the person free to decide, makes the will voluntary in its own right...His [God’s] only purpose in giving the capacity for evil was that we accomplish his will by our own will. Thus we have the freedom to choose or oppose, to accept or reject.”*⁷

Human free will is not the only factor involved in a person’s conversion or salvation Pelagius view. Grace also plays an important role. But, Pelagius understood grace functioning in a specific way in a Christian’s life. Pelagius thought that if it was possible for God’s people could live righteously before the time of Christ, then we ought to be able to do all the more after his coming. According to Pelagius,

*“Christ’s grace has taught us and regenerated us as better persons. His blood has purged and cleansed us; his example spurred us to righteousness. We should be better than people who lived before the law, therefore, and better than people who lived under the law.”*⁸

Christ’s life, teachings, and sacrifice, as well as the remission and forgiveness of sins through Christ’s redemptive work are all part of grace for Pelagius. Grace consists of divine “assistance,” primarily in the form of external assistance through God’s revelation in Scripture.⁹ Thus, Christians have received a much greater grace (i.e. instruction and encouragement on how to live rightly) than any that have gone before them because they have Christ’s example to follow and learn from. In addition, grace is not a sort of internal endowment that enables one to choose good over evil.

Grace is merely a facilitator that helps a person choose what is good but certainly does not compel them to do so. In other words, “Pelagius thinks of grace as bestowed in the basic conditions and the external frameworks, as it were, of the Christian life, rather than as a power infused into the soul of the Christian.”¹⁰ This statement addresses the core of Pelagius’ belief, which is “the assumption of the plenary 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.”¹¹ In Pelagius’ concept of Christian salvation there is no need for divine grace. Salvation was attainable through a life of simple, ascetic, self-control. Grace was a form of assistance that gave a person better means by which they may live a Christian life.

III. AUGUSTINE

On the other side of the controversy is a theologian and philosopher contemporary with Pelagius named Augustine. Augustine came from a Manichaean background which looked at matter (physical world) as essentially bad and all actions and events in the world have been predestined to happen.¹² According to this philosophical framework, Augustine felt his conversion to Christianity was not of his own choosing. He believed that he had been saved by “irresistible divine grace from sins which he could never have overcome by his own strength.”¹³ Augustine’s view of the human condition was one of permanence, unable to be altered without

¹⁰ Ibid., 159.

¹¹ B.B. Warfield, *Augustine & The Pelagian Controversy* ([cited October 20, 2012]); available from <http://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/articles/onsite/augpe1.html#augustine>.

¹² Manichaeism was a Gnostic religion founded and developed by a “prophet” named Mani in the 3rd century C.E. The Manichean philosophy revolved around a dualistic cosmology where the universe is divided between the spiritual world that represents light and the physical and material world that represents darkness.

¹³ Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), 169.

⁷ Pelag., *Ep. Dem.* 3.

⁸ Pelag., *Ep. Dem.* 9.

⁹ Cunliffe-Jone, *Christian Doctrine*, 159.

divine intervention. To Augustine, humankind was bound and shackled by the power of sin, which utterly dominated the human will forcing a person to do what was evil. Humanity was in bondage and stuck in a pit from which it could not escape. Sin had infested every part of the human race and continually prevented any effort to do good. The basic premise of Augustine regarding the potential of the human will was:

*“The most we can accomplish is to struggle between willing and not willing, which does little more than show the powerlessness of our will against itself. The sinner can will nothing but sin.”*¹⁴

One might wonder, then, how a person could ever do what is right, or much less be saved, if all they are capable of doing is sinning. While humans have free will to choose, willingness does not equal ability in Augustine’s eyes. As Augustine asserts:

*“Willingness does not imply ability, nor ability willing: we sometimes will what we are not able to do, and sometimes are able to do what we do not will.”*¹⁵

So then how can a person be saved if their will is unmatched by their ability? In other words, how can a person receive salvation if they are unable to do anything good even though they want to? For Augustine, salvation cannot be by free will choice alone, because free choice avails only sin.¹⁶ While a person may believe because they will in themselves to do so, their faith is in their power because it is a willing act. It is the human will consenting to God’s call that Augustine argues is the act of acceptance whereby a person can receive God’s gift of salvation. This gift enables a person to delight in God and experience his

love, which is “that supreme and changeless Good,” as he describes it.¹⁷ Upon receiving the gift of grace, a person can perform good works and loving acts.

Therefore, since humans are incapable of doing any good as part of a saving act, all power to do good must of necessity come from God who bestows this gift. Furthermore, according to Augustine, a person’s role in salvation is then one of inclination of the will to be saved and then reception of God’s gracious gift whereby they become infused with a heavenly power that swells up in them so that they love righteousness and can overcome sinful desires. The human will is divinely assisted by the grace that comes through the work of Christ, enabling a person to keep the “Christian life.”¹⁸ Christ was the agent that reversed the curse of Adam’s sin, which Augustine saw as the sickness that ails every person in the world.¹⁹ People are born already doomed to failure because of sin and they are completely depraved (corrupted) to change that condition. Only through the work of Christ has grace become available to overpower sin and offer salvation to those whom God chooses to offer salvation to. Therefore, salvation is not a choice humankind can make. A person is chosen to receive grace leading to salvation by the will of God alone.

In Augustine’s view, then, salvation comes to only those who are given this “grace” by God to triumph sin in their lives. Without this grace, a person could will to do good but it will never happen. However, in order to receive this special grace, a person must first believe, and this belief is their mental consent, an act of their will.²⁰ However, their willingness does not constitute salvific power in the sense that a person can will to be saved and it is accomplished apart from God’s prior intervention. For Augustine, grace was an indispensable

¹⁴ Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity: The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation* (vol. 1; New York: Harper One, 2010), 249.

¹⁵ Aug., *Spir. et litt.* 53.

¹⁶ Aug., *Spir. et litt.* 5.

¹⁷ Aug., *Spir. et litt.* 5.

¹⁸ Aug., *Spir. et litt.* 5, 20.

¹⁹ Aug., *Spir. et litt.* 9.

²⁰ Aug., *Spir. et litt.* 57.

and necessary aid in salvation that God chooses to give a person to overcome sin and be saved. The main work of grace in the life of a person who wills to be saved is the indwelling love of God that gradually transforms their character.²¹ Augustine saw the work of grace in enabling a person to receive salvation as actually freeing the human soul from bondage to sin and granting it the power to freely choose righteousness wherewith it would not have been possible otherwise on account of sin. Augustine's reasoning is as follows:

*“Do we then ‘make void’ freedom of choice through grace? ‘God forbid! Yea, we establish freedom of choice.’ As the law is not made void by faith, so freedom of choice is not made void but established by grace. Freedom of choice is necessary to the fulfillment of the law. But by the law comes the knowledge of sin; by faith comes the obtaining of grace against sin; by grace comes the healing of the soul from sin's sickness; by the healing of the soul comes freedom of choice; by freedom of choice comes the love of righteousness; by the love of righteousness comes the working of the law. And thus, as the law is not made void but established by faith, since faith obtains the grace whereby the law may be fulfilled, so freedom of choice is not made void but established by grace, since grace heals the will whereby righteousness may freely be loved.”....
“How, if they are slaves of sin, can they boast freedom of choice?”²²*

Augustine's argument comes down to one principle: a person cannot choose what they want to do if they are enslaved – the choice has already made for them. Only God can come and rescue a person from their own evil desires by giving them the grace they need to overcome sin.

IV. TWO PERSPECTIVES

As described above, Augustine and Pelagius held differing views on several matters surrounding the capacity of the human will and its function in the process of salvation. With such antithetical stances on these primary issues of faith it is not unexpected that they would clash and contend with each other over this aspect of theology.

To summarize, Pelagius' position is that every person is a free person to choose that which they will to do, and if they desire to be saved, it is a matter of abstaining from sinful behavior and seeking godliness in all things. Augustine would agree that God has indeed made people free and that it is peoples' own will which is responsible for the evil they do, certainly not God. But Augustine would clarify by saying that a person's will may want to do good but they are incapable of following through and doing good due to being a slave of sin. That is, a person's ability is subservient to the power of sin regardless of what they truly desire to do (even if it is to do good). Pelagius maintains that this is not so because as a rational and logical creature, humans ultimately decide for themselves whether to do good or evil. If a person can will to do something, what force stands in the way of their will being fulfilled? Pelagius sees no constraint upon humankind that forces them to sin against their will. Augustine would assert that the will is immutably subjected to sin, and thus, all that emanates from an unregenerate person is sin for they can do no other.

The conclusion for Augustine is not that a person is free to choose good or evil, it is that they are only free to choose what type of evil they will perform. Another way to state Augustine's view is that “between the fall and redemption the only freedom left to us is the freedom to sin.”²³ Until God intervenes and gives the gift of grace,

²¹ Walker, *History*, 169.

²² Aug., *Spir. et litt.* 52.

²³ González, *Christianity*, 249.

a person is compelled to continue in their obedience to sin. Augustine even argues that people are not free to accept the gift of grace. Grace is not something that is willed to receive but something that is accepted upon being offered. The initiative resides wholly with God alone and God's prerogative of who should be chosen (elected).

Pelagius does not see the requirement for a person to wait for grace in order to do good. The human soul is not corrupted by the sin of Adam. People (including children) do not sin until they choose from out of their own free will to sin. Thus, there is no such thing as original sin or a corruption of human nature passed through all human beings from Adam. Augustine would posit that sin is inherent in humankind and even the unlearned selfish and greedy behavior of children substantiates the power of sin already present in every one.

V. CONCLUSION

Sorting out all the details of the controversy between Augustine and Pelagius can be a daunting task, but the difference their positions can be summed up briefly as follows. Pelagius' view does not advocate any supplemental ingredient or external subsidy in order to do good and attain salvation. The human will is the sole deciding factor upon which a person's actions rest that their eternal destiny. On the contrary, Augustine's view requires an irresistible gift of grace to be given by God to a person to enable them to overcome sin and do good. Salvation is thus not granted simply because one wills to be saved. Salvation is an act of God choosing to extend grace to certain humans so they can be free to choose good rather than evil. Those that God chooses to save are offered this special grace, and when a person is offered this grace, it is so powerful as to be indeclinable on the part of the recipient.

The Augustine–Pelagian controversy did not end with the persecution and death of Pelagius by Augustine

in the 5th century but continued for over a millennia erupting again in the 16th century between noted theologians Martin Luther and Desiderius Erasmus. The controversy then culminated in the infamous contention between John Calvin and Jacobius Arminius in the 17th century. This issue has been the topic of countless heated debates among Christians and has caused an untold number of major divisions among God's people. But, this theological subject is of paramount importance and will undoubtedly continue until the day the Lord returns.

VI. ABBREVIATIONS

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| <i>Aug. Conf.</i> | Augustine, <i>Confessions</i> |
| <i>Aug., Spir. et litt.</i> | Augustine, <i>The Spirit and the Letter</i> |
| <i>Pelag., Ep. Dem.</i> | Pelagius, <i>Letter to Demetrias</i> |

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