

WILLIAM P. FARLEY



Augustines Vs. Pelagius, and Why it Matters Today!

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LIFE IN FOURTH CENTURY ROME WAS DIFFICULT AT BEST. The population was about 1 million. The next largest city was 300,000. Rodney Stark, in his book *Cities of God*, notes that "Roman cities were small, extremely crowded, filthy beyond imagining, disorderly, filled with strangers, and afflicted with frequent catastrophes—fires, plagues, conquests, and earthquakes...dread of fire was an obsession among rich and poor alike...sewers were ditches running down the middle of each narrow street—ditches into which everything was dumped including chamber pots at night."^[1]

Life expectancy was short, probably about 25-30 years.

On August 26, 410 the beginning of the end came for the decadent Roman Empire. Alaric and his army of Goths broke through Rome's vast walls plundering and raping at will.

Many refugees fled from Rome to North Africa, the breadbasket of the Roman populace.

A secular monk named Pelagius(354-420), with his disciple, Caelestius, were among those fleeing. Although their ultimate destination was Jerusalem they stopped at Hippo where Augustine (354-430) was bishop. Pelagius wanted to meet the famous teacher, but the bishop was out of town, so Pelagius left him a courteous note, which Augustine later answered with similar courtesy.



Roman Empire 117 AD

Continuing on his way to Jerusalem, Pelagius stopped at Carthage, the capital of North Africa, where he left Caelestius. Caelestius was Pelagius' mouthpiece, and he began to teach his master's doctrinal system. When Caelestius' teaching reached Augustine, a doctrinal controversy began whose shock waves still shake the modern world. This conflict was central to the Reformation 1100 years later, and every generation of Christians has had to refight the same battle.

To understand the controversy, we need to acquaint ourselves with both Pelagius and Augustine. They had much in common. Both were born in 354. When the conflict began, they were in their twilight years, mid-fifties. Pelagius came from the British Isles, but Augustine came from North Africa. Both first visited Rome in their early thirties. Pelagius took up the ascetic life of a monk, ministering to poor dock-workers and laborers. He lived in Rome for many years, until, as we have seen, its sacking made him flee to North Africa. By the standards of the time, both men were well educated. Both were convinced their positions were scriptural. Both were lovers of peace. Neither enjoyed conflict.

However, Augustine and Pelagius differed at critical and crucial junctures.

Augustine

Unlike Pelagius, Augustine came to Rome in his twenties. He was raised a Christian in North Africa. He was a professor of rhetoric, i.e. public speaking, but he had abandoned his youthful Christianity, and taken a mistress. He was controlled by lust.



Augustine

After a few years he moved to Milan in Northern Italy. There the preaching of Bishop Ambrose (340-97) began to influence him. Slowly and increasingly, Augustine felt great conviction, but for him Christianity seemed impossible. How could he let Ambrose baptize him? Since his youth, sexual lust had dominated his life. To Augustine, chastity and sexual purity seemed utterly unrealistic. He felt hopeless.

At the depth of his despair he was sitting in a garden when he heard a strange voice over the garden wall, "Pick up and read. Pick up and read." A scroll containing Paul's letter to the Romans

was nearby, so he picked it up. His eyes randomly fell on Romans 13:13-14.

“Not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality...But put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.”

Instantly great faith—confidence that God would give him power to change—overcame his despair. Freed from unbelief and self-reliance he turned to Christ.

For the rest of his life Augustine was a convert to the grace of God. His struggle with indwelling sin, and the power of grace to shatter its chains, affected him permanently.

Like Athanasius and Calvin and Edwards, he decided to live a quite life of celibate scholarship so he received baptism and packed his bags for Africa. But, God had other plans. A few years passed, then, learning of his conversion and return, the seaport town of Hippo pressed him into service as their bishop. He reluctantly agreed and served at that post until his death forty years later.

Before he died, Augustine would leave the church a written legacy of five million words. He did this with quill and ink on parchment, not with a word processor. “Augustine shaped the history of the Christian church,” notes John Piper. “His influence in the Western world is simply staggering.”^[ii] About him Oxford historian Diarmaid MacCulloch has written—

“[Augustine’s] impact on Western Christian thought can hardly be overstated; only his beloved example Paul of Tarsus, has been more influential, and Westerners have generally seen Paul through Augustine’s eyes.”

Pelagius

Pelagius is an example of the apostle Paul’s principle that Satan sometimes comes as an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:13-15).^[iii] Such was the case with Pelagius. Like Arius, people liked him. He was a nice guy. He was self-disciplined and moral. He “was a man of clear intellect, mild disposition, learned culture, and spotless character,” observes Phillip Schaff. “Even Augustine, with all his abhorrence of [Pelagius’] doctrines, repeatedly speaks respectfully of the man.”^[iv]

Pelagius had one great liability. He was not clear on sin. He was not clear on sin because he was not fully submitted to God’s word. In addition, he was hampered because he did not experience Augustine’s personal struggle with sin. His unwillingness to submit his reason to God’s word would prove decisive.

During his many years in Rome, Pelagius attracted disciples and even became popular with some in the Roman upper class. We have introduced Caelestius, Pelagius' most important disciple. He was a lawyer from a wealthy family. Pelagius' ascetic lifestyle and moral purity drew Caelestius to him. As we have noted, Pelagius disliked controversy, but not Caelestius. "Pelagius was the moral author," notes Schaff, but "Caelestius the intellectual author, of the system represented by them."^[1]

Dependence upon grace was not important to Pelagius. Rather, his Christianity depended upon an external legalism. It was a "pull yourself up by the bootstraps" spirituality. He was the spiritual John Wayne of the fifth century. He rightly believed that God expected perfection (Matt. 5:48), but wrongly believed that every human had the ability to be perfect. He reasoned that God gives all men power to obey what He commands. If not, God would be unjust. Pelagius' "message was simple and terrifying," notes Peter Brown, Augustine's biographer, "Since perfection is possible for man, it is obligatory."^[v] That was his non-biblical logic.

He believed that any man could be perfect who really wanted to be, and that many Old Testament Saints actually were. It was all up to the human will and self-determination. His favorite text was "*This is the love of God, that we do what he commands*" (1 John 5:3). Again, Peter Brown, Augustine's biographer, writes. "For the Pelagians, man had no excuse for his sins, nor for the evil that was around him."^[vi]

In short, Pelagius completely rejected the biblical teaching that came to be called Original Sin. Original Sin is the Pauline teaching that all men inherit Adam's sin and guilt at conception. Original sin is comprehensive. It cripples every aspect of our nature—will, desires, emotions, and intellect. Therefore, men can never satisfy God's righteous requirements by human effort. He must live by grace.

Pelagius' assumptions logically turned him to asceticism. He gave his life to fasting, sleeplessness, self-punishment, and outward morality. He thought every Christian should do likewise because only an ascetic lifestyle could guarantee one's salvation.

In short, Pelagius' concern was ethics not doctrine. Erasmus would take the same position during the 16th century Reformation. This was his Achilles heel. He wanted a moral reformation of the church, and he was convinced that a misunderstanding of grace was the problem. "Why would someone, saved by grace alone, want to change and become more Christ-like?" In the Roman church, he saw moral laxity, and even indifference. He believed Paul's teaching on grace was the culprit.^[vii]

In about 405 Pelagius' heard someone read the famous prayer from Augustine's *Confessions*, "Command what you will: Give what you command." Pelagius was horrified. If man must rely upon God's grace to obey His commands, then man has no moral responsibility. Christians will be able to blame their sins on God's unwillingness to give grace. He was convinced that Augustine thought man was a robot, completely determined by God and lacking any substantial incentive for moral reformation.^[viii]

The Issue

According to Phillip Schaff, before Augustine's conflict with Pelagius "the anthropology of the church was exceedingly crude and indefinite."^[ix] Although most Christians believed that men were sinners, the nature of sin and how it affects us, had not been thoroughly thought out and defined.

The first question concerned the effect of Adam's sin on us. Does Adam's sin and guilt corrupt us from conception, or are we inherently good, in complete possession of our moral faculties, and able to save ourselves through self-effort?

The second question was this: If Adam's Fall affected us, how far and to what extent did it affect us? Did it cause spiritual death, rendering us unable to respond to God, or does it merely cripple us, leaving our capacities and desires to seek God intact?

Summed up the question is this. Did Jesus go to the cross to help us help ourselves?^[x] Or, did he die because men were utterly bound by sin, unable to help themselves, and in desperate need of a divinely wrought salvation?

What about grace? What does it accomplish? How much grace do men need? How dependent is man upon the grace of God? Does God give grace to make men holy, or does man's holiness qualify him to receive divine grace?

The answers to these questions are important. They affect our understanding of man's freedom. They affect our understanding of Adam's condition before the Fall, of how Adam's Fall affects us, of how God's grace works, the nature of regeneration, the doctrines of predestination and election, whether man's will is free or bound, the judgments of God, how to conduct evangelism, and most importantly the nature and degree of man's dependence upon God.

Every Generation must refight the conflict that raged between Augustine and Pelagius.

The debate between Augustine and Pelagius was over no small issue. The stakes were and are enormous.

Augustine's Victory

The debate accelerated greatly after Caelestius preached his ideas in Carthage, just down the road from Hippo. Between 410 and 416 Augustine answered Caelestius with a series of letters and dissertations arguing the reality and nature of Original Sin from scripture.

From Paul's letters Augustine refuted Pelagius. Adam's sin was no private affair. He represented all men. When Adam fell, all fell in him. We are born debilitated by Adam's sin, whose fundamental nature is pride.

We also enter the world guilty with Adam's guilt. In theological language, Augustine taught that both Adam's sin and guilt are imputed to us. Therefore, we are born dead in sin, unable to believe the gospel or respond to God.

To Augustine we are like a man dead on the bottom of the Ocean. To Pelagius, man was treading water and able to climb into the boat by himself. To Semi-Pelagians man is overboard and drowning. He just needs God to throw him a lifeline.

If man is dead, God must chose and elect those that will be saved. They are on the bottom of the Ocean. God must resurrect them before they will respond to the thrown life-line.

This is what we mean when we say, God gives the elect the gift of faith. We are spiritually dead. God resurrects us so that we can believe. God gives us new birth and *then* we believe and repent. He justifies us, and empowers us to grow in holiness. Eventually God glorifies us. Here is how Bruce Shelley sums up Augustine's anthropology:

"In Augustine's view, Adam's sin had enormous consequences. His power to do right was gone. In a word, he died, spiritually—and soon, physically. But he was not alone in his ruin. Augustine taught that the whole human race was "in Adam" and share his fall. Mankind became a "mass of corruption," incapable of any good (saving) act. Every individual, from earliest infancy to old age, deserves nothing but damnation."^[xi]

Most importantly, Augustine taught that God saves without violating man's moral responsibility to seek and obey God. Augustine embraced the mystery that God is sovereign and man is not a robot. He is also fully responsible. When I was a new Christian, I asked a student of Augustine how the great man was able to reconcile God's sovereignty and man's responsibility?

The Cure for ungodliness is not more discipline. It is Theology.*

*This is a typographical error. The quote is:

The cure for ungodliness is not more DISCIPLINE.
It is Theology.

He wisely answered. "Augustinians never tried to reconcile close friends."

Augustine's theology also generated a profound dependence upon God's glorious grace. His personal experience of indwelling sin convinced him that what he saw in the Bible was right. He was utterly dependent upon God. His prayer, so detested by Pelagius, "Command what you will, and give what you command," expressed the heart and soul of his piety. He understood his dependence upon God for salvation, sanctification, and every other good thing.

Augustine was also convinced that his theological system was the solution to moral laxity. It was only when the church taught Original Sin, humanity's helplessness, and God's free grace that the moral transformation that Pelagius so earnestly sought actually occurs. Why? The doctrines of grace go deep, touching the human heart, transforming it by grace, evoking a life surrendered to God in joyful gratitude. Augustine knew that this inward revolution alone would produce the heart-virtue that God so earnestly seeks.

Aftermath

Pelagius moved to Palestine. There he encountered the great scholar Jerome (347-420) who also opposed Pelagius' ideas.

In the meantime, the conflict between Augustine and Pelagius accelerated. Some Christians sided with Pelagius. Others sided with Augustine. In the last decades of Augustine's life, however,

the church increasingly sided with Augustine and Jerome. In 431 the ecumenical Council of Ephesus, meeting a year after Augustine's death, denounced Pelagianism and endorsed Augustinianism. A century later, the Council of Orange (AD 529) reaffirmed this decision. Since the sixth century, almost universally, Christians have considered Pelagianism a heresy and Augustinianism anthropology to be orthodoxy.

Although Augustine's theology was the accepted orthodoxy, the people were often practical Pelagians. That is because Pelagianism is the default religion of the common man. We are all born Pelagian. From AD 500-1500 the church moved ever closer to Pelagianism. Men increasingly worked to gain God's acceptance. The seven sacraments, attendance at mass, and obedience to the Pope became crucial precedents to salvation.

All of this culminated in the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. In one sense the Reformation was a renewal of the conflict between Augustine and Pelagius. Martin Luther (1483-1546) was an Augustinian Monk. His reading of Paul's epistles, fortified by Augustine's teaching, converted him to Paul's doctrines of grace. In fact, from Augustine both Luther and Calvin appealed to the Catholic authorities to accept justification by faith alone.

So What?

What can today's Christian learn from the conflict between Pelagius and Augustine?

First, the cure for the lukewarmness, that Pelagius so greatly feared, is not more discipline.

Rather, it is the repeated and clear proclamation of humanity's sin, our unworthiness of God's favor, and the magnificent grace of God that saves us. Only as we see our bankruptcy, our need of grace, and our dependence upon God, do we lavishly give ourselves to Christ and His Kingdom.

Second, the history of the Pelagian conflict reminds us that doctrine matters greatly. Churches rise and fall on their doctrinal clarity or its lack. Clarity about the depth, power, and debility of human sin makes churches humble, needy, and fruitful. Failure here renders them lukewarm. The more we understand and abhor sin the less it will control us.

The opposite is also true. Failure to emphasize the doctrine of sin usually amplifies evil. The better we feel about ourselves the worse we usually become. In the twentieth century, Pelagian ideals have unleashed untold horrors. All the utopian movements of the last 100 years—Communism, Fascism, and Nazism—started and built upon Pelagian assumptions about human nature.

Third, every generation must re-fight Augustine’s battle.The conflict did not end in the fifth century. Pelagianism proliferates in the contemporary church. In a recent survey, 77% of professing evangelicals said that they believe that human beings are basically good and 84% believe that in salvation ‘God helps those who help themselves.’^[2] It would be a mistake to assume that this is not the case in our churches.

Last, the history of Pelagianism teaches us that unless we aggressively and regularly teach our congregations about sin, and its manifold affects, Pelagianism will proliferate. Fallen man is by nature proud, and pride leads us to the feet of Pelagius. Pelagianism is the default religion of humanity. Convinced of its power, wise Christians resist it persistently and intentionally.

This chart describes the different views of Christian anthropology, and who holds them. Today, most Christians are semi-Pelagian! History is His Story.

	<u>Pelagian</u>	<u>Semi-Pelagian</u>	<u>Arminian</u>	<u>Reformed</u>
Status?	Alive	Alive	Dead in Sin	Dead In Sin
Who Saves?	Monergism, Man (Man chooses God and perfects himself)	Synergism, Man & HS (We choose God. He chooses us because he forsees our faith)	Partial Monergism, (Prevenient Grace)	Monergism, God Chooses those he will save on the basis on grace, not any forseen goodness!
Advocates?	Pelagius, Liberal Christians, Unitarians, Mormons, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Shintoism, Animism	Catholics, Most Current Protestants	Methodists, Nazarenes, Most Baptists	Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, All the Reformers, Edwards, Westminster Confession, Thirty Nine Articles, Baptist Confession of 1689

[1] Ibid Schaff, pg 792

[2] Horton, Michael, "Pelagianism," *Modern Reformation*, January/February 1994 pg 31-32

[i] Stark, Rodney, *Cities of God*, pg 26-28 (San Francisco, Harper Collins, 2006)

[ii] Piper, John, *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy*,pg 43 (Wheaton, Crossway, 2000)

^[iii] (2 Corinthians 11:13–15) “13 For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. 14 And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. 15 So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds. ”

^[iv] Schaff, Philip, *The History of the Christian Church*, Vol 3, pg 790 (Peabody, MA, Hendrikson, 1867, 2006)

^[v] Brown, Peter, *Augustine of Hippo*, pg 342 (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1967, 2000)

^[vi] Ibid, Brown pg 350

^[vii] The Roman church used the same argument during the Reformation.

^[viii] Today, this is the same accusation most Arminians make about Calvinists.

^[ix] Ibid, Schaff, pg 785

^[x] “In a George Bama poll, more than seventy percent of “professing evangelical Christians” in America expressed the belief that man is basically good. And more than eighty percent

articulated the view that God helps those who help themselves. These positions-or let me say it negatively-neither of these positions is semi-Pelagian. They’re both Pelagian.”—*R. C. Sproul, Pelagian Captivity of the Church.*

^[xi] Shelly, Bruce, *Church History in Plain Language*, pg 129 (Dallas, Word, 1982, 1995)

^[WPF1] Compare to Calvin and Edwards

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