

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

## Predestination in the New Testament and St. Augustine

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### 1. Historical sketch of the Pelagian controversy

Sometime during the first decade of the fifth century A.D., perhaps in the year 405, or maybe a little later, there occurred in the city of Rome a memorable reading of a book which, some fifteen and a half centuries later, became a staple of the Sophomore Seminar reading list at St. John's College. The book was titled the *Confessions*; it was written by Aurelius Augustinus, better known as St. Augustine, who for about the past ten years had served as bishop of the Numidian port city of Hippo Regius, on the North African coast.<sup>1</sup> A certain bishop<sup>2</sup> was reading from book ten of the *Confessions* to a prominent Christian theologian, born in Britain but then residing in Rome, named Pelagius. The reading, it seems, proceeded peacefully until the reader came to the following passage. In paragraph 40 of book ten, Augustine says the following:

“All my hope is nowhere but in thy exceeding great mercy. Give what thou commandest and command what thou wilt. Thou enjoimest continence on us and ‘when I knew,’ says someone, ‘that no man can be continent unless God give it, this also was a part of wisdom to know whose gift she is’ (Wisd. 8:21). By continence indeed we are bound up and brought back into the One, whence we were dissipated into the many. For he loves thee too little who loves anything with thee, which he does not love because of thee. O love that burns and art never extinguished, O charity, my God, set me aflame. Thou commandest continence: give what thou commandest and command what thou wilt.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The current-day Annaba, or Bonê, in Algeria.

<sup>2</sup> Some think Paulinus of Nola, others Augustine's friend Evodius, or perhaps some other bishop visiting Rome from Africa.

<sup>3</sup> Et tota spes mea non nisi in magna misericordia tua. da quod iubes et iube quod vis. imperas nobis continentiam. et cum scirem, ait quidam, quia nemo potest esse continens, nisi deus det, et hoc ipsum erat sapientiae, scire cuius esset hoc donum. per continentiam quippe colligimur et redigimur in unum, a quo in multa defluximus. minus enim te amat qui tecum aliquid amat, quod non propter te amat. o amor, qui

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(*Confessions* X.xxix.40; cited from Stevenson and Frend, eds., *Creeks, Councils, and Controversies* [1989], p. 230.)

Up to this point, Pelagius had been listening quietly to the recitation of Augustine's book. He in fact had already read some of Augustine's earlier writings, and had a high opinion of the bishop of Hippo as a defender of the Catholic faith against the Manichaeans. But at the repeated words, **Da quod jubes, et jube quod vis**, "Give what you command, and command what you will," he lost all patience and began protesting violently. Pelagius saw these words as implying a denial of all human responsibility for freely choosing the good. Augustine's prayer seemed to Pelagius to imply that our ability to do God's will does not depend on us; in order for man to respond to God's commandment, Augustine seemed to be saying, a special gift needs to be given, directly from God. "Give what you command": that is to say, Give it, because otherwise it is impossible to do it. Pelagius found such a teaching insufferable; to use the technical religious word, he viewed it as a heresy. And he thought it a heresy because he thought it removed from the process of salvation the necessity and the possibility of our own freely willing.

Thus began one of the most celebrated controversies in the history of Christianity, usually referred to as the Pelagian controversy. It could be said that the debate between Augustine and Pelagius marked a defining moment for Western Christianity, when much of what is distinctively Western in Western theology, whether Catholic or Protestant, first got hammered out. Debates between followers of Augustine and what are often called, somewhat unfairly, "semi-Pelagians" have continued to flare up at different times, like volcanic eruptions, down through the history of the Church: within the Roman Catholic Church, the Dominicans were for a long time the main defenders of a moderate Augustinianism, the Jesuits the main champions of semi-Pelagianism; their disputes grew so sharp, in the years following the Council of Trent, that a commission, the "Congregatio de Auxiliis," was drawn up by Pope Clement VIII to try to resolve the disputed questions about how grace operates in human salvation; the commission met for ten years, from 1597 to 1607, without being able to come to any agreed solution; at the end of which time the then pope, Paul V, decreed that both sides should stop calling each other heretics and should find other matters with which to preoccupy themselves. Within a few decades, however, the controversy was renewed with the posthumous publication, in 1640, of a book on St. Augustine by a priest named Cornelius Jansen, which gave rise to a hard-line Augustinian school of thought in France called Jansenism. This movement counted among its adherents or sympathizers such prominent writers as the poet Racine and Blaise Pascal; it was opposed chiefly by the Jesuits, and was forcibly suppressed in

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semper ardes et numquam extingueris, caritas, deus meus, accende me! continentiam iubes: da quod iubes et iube quod vis.

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the early eighteenth century with the destruction of its main spiritual center, the Convent of Port-Royal. As for Protestantism, both Luther and Calvin, in their doctrine of salvation, were extreme Augustinians, though before long there began to be seen movements in reaction to the doctrine within Protestantism itself. In English-speaking countries especially, the split between the Augustinian and the semi-Pelagian varieties of Protestantism has tended to be represented as a conflict between Calvinists and Arminians (so named after a sixteenth century Dutch reformed minister named Jacob Arminius).<sup>4</sup> The importance of this debate within Protestantism is evidently not what it used to be, in its heyday back in the early days of our Republic, when books on predestination were best-sellers; yet the Calvinists are far from being intellectually moribund, and there is still a fair amount of Calvinistic literature being produced in this country, both in print and on the internet, much of it robustly denouncing any disagreement with their doctrine as a sign of biblical illiteracy if not of the very reprobation of which their doctrine so famously speaks. Scholarly debate also occurs between Catholics and Protestants over the question how actually Calvinistic was St. Augustine in his teaching on Predestination, and whether Augustine would have recognized the likes of Luther and Calvin as his legitimate spiritual progeny.

As I am neither Protestant nor Catholic, but an Orthodox Christian, I approach this whole issue as something of an outsider. The question of Predestination is almost never brought up in an Orthodox church; on the rare occasions that it is, it is generally in order to belittle those Christians, like the Calvinists, who make a big deal of it. The claim is often made that a God who would arbitrarily condemn a large portion of humankind to eternal punishment without their ever having had a real chance to respond to his grace is not a God worth believing in; and it is also claimed that that is not, in fact, the character of the biblical God, who, according to 1 Tim 2:4, “desires all men to be saved, and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” To say this is, in a way, to say that the Orthodox Church is firmly on the side of the semi-Pelagians (though not of Pelagius himself, whose views on salvation the Orthodox Church, like most other Christian bodies, rejects as heretical). Yet Augustine, who knew the Bible about as well as anybody, is surely not an unperceptive reader of Scripture; his readings are seldom merely arbitrary. If there were not some important scriptural foundations for his teaching on predestination, he would surely not have taught it, nor would so many of the best Christian minds over the past millennium and a half have taken his views so seriously. So my object in this lecture will be to examine his views and the historical context in which they arose, and to reflect upon how far

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<sup>4</sup> This Calvinist/Arminian split, it should be noted, seems to have transformed itself into a more general split between Conservative and Liberal varieties of Protestantism around the beginning of the Twentieth Century.

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Augustine's views on such matters as sin, grace, justification, and eternal predestination illuminate what the text of the Bible actually says.

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Pelagius, as mentioned, was from Britain; he is in fact the earliest British writer whose works have come down to us. Around the year 380 he settled in Rome, perhaps originally intending to study law. By the decade of the 390's he had adopted the character of a Christian ascetic, and was making a name for himself as a teacher and spiritual guide to some of the very rich Roman families that had recently been converted to Christianity. (Pelagius is sometimes referred to as a monk: in the broad sense of the term, this is correct; in the strict sense, as applying to one who lives in a religious community separate from the rest of society and following a formal rule of prayer, it is not, and Pelagius did not claim to be one.) Pelagius was well-educated, had a reputation for moderate asceticism, and was a forceful preacher against economic and moral corruptions in the Roman society of his day; his point was always that keeping God's law is not an option but a commandment, and that, since God has given the human race free will, moral perfection is obligatory for us: we have no one to blame for our lack of it except ourselves. During the decade of the 390's Pelagius became involved in a debate between St. Jerome (best known for the Vulgate, his translation of the Bible into Latin) and a man named Jovinian: Jovinian taught that the married life and virginity are of equal spiritual value; Jerome, on the contrary, maintained that, according to the New Testament, virginity is higher. Pelagius tried to mediate between the two men, and only managed thereby to earn Jerome's lasting ill-will. We have from Jerome certain observations on Pelagius's physical appearance, written in the preface to Jerome's *Commentary on Jeremiah* at a time when the Pelagian Controversy was in full swing. He calls Pelagius "slanty-head," "this dolt weighed down with Scottish porridge," and "this big, bloated Alpine dog, able to rage more effectively with his heels than with his teeth". Whether Jerome is to be trusted as giving an accurate and impartial description of Pelagius may be doubted. Augustine himself, although he was involved in bitter polemics with Pelagius and his followers for upwards of twenty years, does not descend to personal invective; it was only with great reluctance that, some time after the start of the controversy, Augustine began criticizing Pelagius directly. Especially at the start of the debate, Augustine considered Pelagius a revered Christian ascetic and a man of high moral character. Certainly open vice was not the fault of the Pelagians: if it were, their whole argument about the human condition and man's inherent ability to keep the law would have been undercut.

Pelagius lived in Rome till about the year 410. During his time in Rome he gained a number of followers, most notably a certain lawyer named Celestius, whom Pelagius converted from the legal profession to a life of Christian asceticism. This Celestius became

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a vigorous propagandist of Pelagius's teachings, more vigorous, indeed, than Pelagius himself, and it is probably true that if it had not been for Celestius the whole controversy would never have gotten off the ground. It would be wrong, however, to suppose that Pelagius and Celestius had identical theological interests; even to call the whole movement "Pelagianism" is something of a misnomer. Some of Celestius's main ideas seem in fact to have been derived from the teachings of a priest named Rufinus the Syrian. Not much is known about him, but some people have seen him as the real founder of Pelagianism, as a system of doctrine. He came to Rome for a brief visit during the year 399, and gave some lectures which Celestius is known to have attended. Probably the content of these lectures resembled the contents of a small book written by him, the *Liber de Fide*, or "Book on the Faith." This book's main purpose is to combat the opinions of an important Greek theologian of the third century named Origen, opinions which were at the center of much heated debate among Christians at the end of the fourth century. Among the errors of Origen Rufinus was most concerned to combat was the notion that souls preexist their physical, embodied existence, that is to say, that God created all souls at the beginning of creation and holds them in storage until the time comes for a particular human being to be born. For Rufinus the Syrian (and Celestius who follows him), there are only two possibilities as to the origin of human souls. One is that each person's soul is created by God by a separate act, whether at conception or at some moment shortly after that and prior to birth; this is the view called "creationism," and it is the view Rufinus himself favors. The other possibility is that the soul of each person is a kind of offshoot of the original soul imparted by God to Adam, when, as it says in Genesis ch. 2, after having formed man of the dust of the ground, God "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul." This second view holds that the soul, somewhat like a genetic inheritance, gets passed down from parents to children, from generation to generation, and that, perhaps, the seeds of all human souls were originally present in that original human soul which was Adam's. This view is called "traducianism," from the Latin **traducere**, to pass down. This view Rufinus is strongly opposed to; he sees it to be integrally connected with the view that there is a **tradux peccati**, a passing down from Adam, not only of the soul, but of Adam and Eve's sin. The consequences of such a view Rufinus regards as monstrous: that infants who die unbaptized are damned, though they have committed no sin in their own person, which Rufinus sees as an impugning of the justice of God. For Rufinus, infants, although mortal as a result of Adam's sin, are morally exactly in the position Adam was before the fall, that is, sinless. If then infants are baptized, it is not, Rufinus holds, for the remission of sins, since they have none; rather, he says, it is in order to bestow upon them the heavenly life. Although Rufinus seems to have died before the actual outbreak of the Pelagian Controversy, it was his views upon baptism and the impossibility of a transmission of Adam's sin that, when asserted by the lawyer Celestius, became the initial focal point of contention.



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In the year 410, the Roman world experienced a major shock. On August 24th of that year, the city of Rome fell to the armies of Alaric the Goth. It was the first time in nearly 800 years that Rome had fallen to a foreign invader. At some point during Alaric's siege, Pelagius and Celestius were able to leave the city; along with thousands of other people, they became refugees. Their first destination was Sicily, where they stayed briefly, making a few converts to their theology. In the year 411 they arrived in North Africa; they disembarked at the port of Hippo, which suggests that they may have hoped to have a discussion with the bishop of the town, St. Augustine; he, however, was away at the time, so the two men continued south-east to Carthage. In one of his later books, Augustine tells us that he did subsequently catch sight of Pelagius once or twice from a distance while he was at Carthage, but that, being preoccupied with other business, he didn't get a chance to speak with him. Very soon after coming to Carthage, Pelagius left for the Greek-speaking East, and settled in the province of Palestine. Probably he thought, with good reason, that his opinions would get a better reception among the Greeks than among the North Africans.

Celestius, however, remained at Carthage; and, within a couple of months of his arrival at the city, he petitioned the bishop of Carthage, Aurelius, for ordination. (That is to say, he asked to be made a priest. In those days, people did not prepare for the priesthood by going to seminary, as they do now, but if someone had a reputation for learning and piety, his name would be recommended to the bishop, who, then as now, would make the final decision about ordination. Often, in fact, people were made priests unwillingly: this was the case with St. Augustine. When visiting Hippo on other business in the year 391, he was recognized by people as a famous orator; they grabbed him during a church service and brought him, weeping, to their bishop, who, as he was a Greek and could speak Latin only with difficulty, was glad to find such a competent man as a helper. Similar things happened in the lives of other fathers of the Church, such as St. John Chrysostom, St. Gregory the Theologian, and St. Ambrose of Milan.) At this time, when Celestius was petitioning to become a priest, there was in Carthage a certain deacon from Milan, named Paulinus. Paulinus knew about Celestius from Italy, and knew that he had been teaching some peculiar things concerning baptism, sin, and other subjects; he therefore accused him before the bishop. A synod, or council, was accordingly called to decide of Celestius's case; it was held in Carthage in the fall of 411, presided over by the bishop Aurelius; Paulinus served as a kind of prosecuting attorney, Celestius as a lawyer in his own defense. Seven charges were brought up against Celestius; he was accused of having taught, among other things, that Adam would have died, whether he had sinned or not; that Adam's sin injured himself only, and not the human race; that infants are born in the same state in which Adam was before the fall; and that even before the coming

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of Christ, there were men who lived without sin.<sup>5</sup> The minutes of this trial, preserved by St. Augustine in his book *On Original Sin*, make for interesting reading: Celestius is obviously well-versed in techniques of legal argumentation. Nevertheless, although he did the best he could to parry Paulinus's questions and turn them back upon his accuser, in the end he refused to condemn the propositions "that Adam's sin injured only himself, and not the human race" and "that infants at their birth are in the same condition Adam was before his transgression." He was, accordingly, excommunicated. Thereupon he left Carthage and sailed to Asia Minor; a few years later he found at Ephesus a bishop willing to ordain him.

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One should note that Augustine was not directly involved in this trial. The decision to condemn Celestius, although it was a decision Augustine agreed with, was a decision of the African Church as a whole. It is sometimes claimed that the idea of "Original Sin," the notion that responsibility for Adam's transgression is shared in by all of Adam's descendants, was Augustine's invention and was unheard of before his time. If that were true, it is unclear why the rest of the North Africans should have been so upset about what Pelagius and his friends were teaching.<sup>6</sup> It is true that Augustine probably coined the expression "original sin," **peccatum originale**.<sup>7</sup> It is also true that the notion of an inherited sin of Adam was developed by Augustine in ways that no one had done before him — in particular, that it came to mean something like an original guilt, a crime for which Adam's descendants are collectively and individually responsible. But to say that the doctrine itself of our common participation in Adam's sin was Augustine's invention would, I think, be untrue. Augustine frequently refers to the third-century African writer St. Cyprian in support of it, as well as to other Latin fathers like Ambrose and Jerome.

The teaching that not only death was passed down to Adam's descendants, but Adam's sin itself, is expressly taught by Ambrosiaster in his *Commentary on the Epistles of Saint*

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<sup>5</sup> The complete charges run as follows: 1. that Adam was created mortal, and would have died, whether he had sinned or not; 2. that Adam's sin injured himself only, and not the human race; 3. that infants are born in the same state in which Adam was before the fall; 4. that men neither die in consequence of Adam's death or fall, nor rise again in consequence of Christ's resurrection; 5. that infants, though not baptized, have eternal life; 6. that the law is as good a means of salvation as the gospel; and 7. that even before the advent of Christ, there were men who lived without sin.

<sup>6</sup> Rees, pp. 58 f., notes that, "in his book *Tradux Peccati* the Italian theologian Beatrice traces the source of the doctrine to territories unexplored by Augustine or, for that matter, N. P. Williams — 'Encratite circles, which were widespread in Egypt in the second half of the second century, and of which Julius Cassianus was an authoritative exponent.' He claims that the doctrine then spread to African and Latin Christianity and that Tertullian, Cyprian, Hilarius, Ambrosiaster and Ambrose all tried to reconcile it with the need to safeguard traditional teachings on creation, marriage and free will."

<sup>7</sup> The phrase first occurs in Augustine's writings around 396, in his *Reply to Various Questions of Simplicianus*.

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*Paul*, written about the year 375. (The real identity of this author is unknown; because his writings were passed down among the works of St. Ambrose of Milan the name “Ambrosiaster” was given to him at the time of the Renaissance. He seems to have lived in Rome. Augustine, who had read his commentary, refers to him as “the sainted Hilary” or “Hilary the deacon.”)<sup>8</sup> On the important text of Romans 5:12, Ambrosiaster provides the following commentary; he first quotes the text, **in quo omnes peccaverunt**, and then goes on:

*“In whom, that is, in Adam, all have sinned. He (Paul) uses the masculine (in quo) though he is speaking about the woman, because his reference was not to the sex, but to the race. So it is clear that all have sinned in Adam collectively, as it were (quasi in massa). He was himself corrupted by sin and the race that he begat were all born under sin. From him therefore all are sinners, because we are all produced from him.”*<sup>9</sup>

Ambrosiaster, like Augustine after him, relies here upon a faulty Latin translation of Romans 5:12, which renders the Greek **eph’ ho**, “in that,” “inasmuch as,” as **in quo**, “in whom.”<sup>10</sup> This translation, “in whom all have sinned,” it should be said, had long been traditional within the Latin-speaking Church; even Pelagius, in his own commentary on St. Paul’s epistles, adopts this reading, though he strongly disagrees with the interpretation that it implies a transmission of sin; likewise, Jerome translates **eph’ ho** as **in quo** in the Vulgate, though Jerome is certainly able to read Greek. Given the importance of the argument he bases on the text, Augustine may be faulted for not having spent more energy checking his translation. But, although this text is clearly an important one for Augustine’s understanding of original sin, it would be wrong to see his whole doctrine as hinging upon it. For one thing, Augustine sees original sin as implied by the argument of ch. 5 of Romans as a whole. The chapter sets up a parallelism between Adam and Christ: as by the offense of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation, so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men to justification of life; for, as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous. Paul’s teaching that, in Christ, all are justified seems to imply as a corollary that, in Adam, all are *unjustified*, all lose an original justice. Moreover, while Augustine is aware that some people interpret Rom. 5:12 as implying that what we have

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<sup>8</sup> *Against Two Letters of the Pelagians*, book IV, ch. 7. Augustine may have confused him with St. Hilary of Poitiers.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted from J. Stevenson and W.H.C. Frend, eds., *Creeeds, Councils and Controversies*, rev. ed. (London: SPCK, 1989), pp. 230f.

<sup>10</sup> The King James translation renders the passage thus: “Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned.” It provides, however, the reading “in whom all have sinned” in the margin, as a legitimate variant.



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from Adam is not sin itself, but death, that it is on account of mortality, passed down from Adam, that all become sinners, he thinks that this interpretation is inadequate. We do not sin because we die, but we die because we sin: the wages of sin is death, Paul says, not the wages of death is sin (Rom 6:23). And if Adam's death is passed upon all his progeny, without their inheriting Adam's sin which was the cause of this death, if, that is, they possess the penalty without possessing the fault, what does that say about the justice of God?<sup>11</sup>

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By and large the reception Pelagius received in Palestine was much better than what could have been expected back in the West. He soon struck up a friendship with the bishop of Jerusalem, John. Like Pelagius, though for different reasons, this Bishop John had gotten on the bad side of St. Jerome, something that it seems was very easy to do since St. Jerome was one of the most famously cantankerous men in the history of the Church. The particular issue over which Jerome and Bishop John had scuffled was the theology of Origen, the third-century writer already briefly mentioned: Bishop John had defended Origen, Jerome, after at first having been very receptive towards Origen's ideas, had come to oppose him. Jerome had established a monastery at Bethlehem, catering to the many pilgrims who came there from the West. From there, he could easily hear of Pelagius's activities at Jerusalem, and learn of the popular support that he was starting to gain. The old animosity between the two men was soon revived; accusations were traded back and forth. In particular, Jerome claimed that Pelagius was an Origenist. There may, indeed, have been some justice to this assertion: Pelagius had depended heavily upon Origen's interpretations when writing his own *Commentary* upon St. Paul's epistles, and certainly, like Origen, he was a staunch defender of the innate freedom of the human will. But what most disturbed Jerome about Pelagius was the latter's denigration of grace. Jerome recognizes that Pelagius is able to use the term "grace": it would, indeed, be difficult for anyone who pretends to take the New Testament seriously not to. But, according to Jerome, when Pelagius and his followers speak of God's "grace" to human beings, they mean by it, on the one hand, merely the "gift" from God of our created human nature, and, on the other hand, the gift of the law — the one giving us the natural capacity to act, the other giving the rules and principles which should guide our action.<sup>12</sup> These criticisms of Pelagius's doctrine begin appearing in Jerome's letters around the year 414; they were to be echoed by St. Augustine shortly thereafter.

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<sup>11</sup> "But how do the Pelagians say 'that only death passed upon us by Adam's means'? For if we die because he died, but he died because he sinned, they say that the punishment passed without the guilt, and that innocent infants are punished with an unjust penalty without the deserts of death." *Against Two Letters of the Pelagians*, book IV, ch. 6, NPNF i.5, p. 419.

<sup>12</sup> See Jerome, *Epist.* 133.5-8.

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In the year 414, Pelagius came out with a book in which he defends his teachings against the criticisms of Jerome; the book was titled *On Nature*. Augustine soon managed to procure a copy of this book, and was shocked at what he found there. He replied to this book in a work titled *On Nature and Grace*; it was the first of Augustine's works in which Pelagius was criticized directly. Like Jerome, Augustine saw Pelagius as basically reducing grace to our human nature, enlightened by the law. To do this, Augustine believed, was to make nonsense of the New Testament and of Christian experience. As Augustine says in this book, although "human nature was in the beginning created blameless and without any defect, ... that human nature, in which each of us is born of Adam, now needs a physician, because it is not in good health."<sup>13</sup> To make righteousness a matter merely of the right use of the natural will as guided by law is, Augustine says, to do away with humanity's need of Christ; it is to say that we can basically save ourselves.

This may be an opportune moment to say a bit more about Pelagius's theology. If for Celestius and Rufinus the Syrian the main issue was a denial of any transmission of sin, for Pelagius the fundamental issue was the freedom of the will. As Pelagius remarks in his "Letter to Demetrias," written in 414: "Whenever I have to speak on the subject of moral instruction and the conduct of a holy life, it is my practice first to *demonstrate the power and quality of human nature* and to show what it is capable of achieving, and then to encourage the mind of the listener to consider the idea of different kinds of virtues..."<sup>14</sup> In a work titled *On the Grace of Christ*, written in 418, Augustine gives an analysis of Pelagius's philosophy of will, giving citations from a lost work of Pelagius's, *In Defense of Free Will*.

"In his system," Augustine says, "he posits and distinguishes three faculties, by which he says God's commandments are fulfilled — capacity, volition, and action (**possibilitas, voluntas, actio**): meaning by 'capacity,' that by which a man is able to be righteous; by 'volition,' that by which he wills to be righteous; by 'action,' that by which he actually is righteous. The first of these, the capacity, he allows to have been bestowed upon us by the Creator of our nature; it is not in our power, and we possess it even against our will. The other two, however, the volition and the action, he asserts to be our own; and he assigns them to us so strictly as to contend that they proceed simply from ourselves."<sup>15</sup>

Augustine remarks that, if these faculties are all that is involved in any human action, Pelagius leaves no place for grace, in the sense of a direct gift from God empowering our

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<sup>13</sup> *De nat. et gratia*, iii.3; NPNF i.5, p. 123.

<sup>14</sup> Rees, *The Letters of Pelagius and his Followers*, p. 36.

<sup>15</sup> *On the Grace of Christ*, iii.4; NPNF i.5, p. 218.

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wills. If, as the Apostle John says, “love is from God” (1 John 4:7), then Pelagius’s scheme leaves no room for it. Our wills are our own; as one of Pelagius’s followers later said, **Homo libero arbitrio emancipatus a deo**, “Man by free will is emancipated from God.” The nice distinction Pelagius makes between what is in our power and what is not suggests that those who have seen a close relationship between Pelagianism and Stoicism are probably not far off the mark.

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At the root of Augustine’s quarrel with Pelagius was a disagreement about what “free will” means. Both Augustine and Pelagius want to affirm both free will and grace, yet they mean very different things by these terms. For Pelagius, to have free will meant to be in a state of indifference, where either one or the other of two possibilities may be chosen. “We have implanted in us by God,” he says, “a capacity for either part. It resembles ... a fruitful and fecund 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.”<sup>16</sup> And it must be said that such an ability to choose between different possibilities is what most people generally mean when they speak of free will. As for Augustine, the fact that we make choices is self-evident to him, and to that extent all of us exhibit free will all the time; the deeper question for him, however, is what is behind the choices we actually make. In our processes of deliberation, Augustine would say, none of us are perfectly equal balances: in all our more important choices, we are determined by the weight of what we love. True freedom of will is not found in a state of indifference, which in spiritual matters, Augustine thinks, never really occurs; true freedom occurs when one’s will is determined by the love of the highest good, which is God. “Either make the tree good, and his fruit good,” Jesus says, “or else make the tree corrupt, and his fruit corrupt” (Matt 12:33). “A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit” (Matt 7:18). The same fountain cannot send forth both sweet water and briney (James 3:11). Augustine cites scriptural passages like these in order to show that, whatever one is to make of Pelagius’s state of indifference, it is not the biblical view of man’s condition.

In the year 415 Augustine sent Jerome two letters. In those days there was no reliable public mail service: the best way of getting mail to a correspondent was to entrust one’s letters to a dependable person who happened to be travelling towards the letters’ destination. At this time there was a young Spanish priest visiting Augustine, named Paulus Orosius; Augustine entrusted to him his two letters to Jerome, together with some documentation concerning the Pelagian heresy, and sent him off to Palestine. When Orosius arrived he was dismayed to find Pelagius on such good terms with the bishop of Jerusalem. Orosius protested to Bishop John that Pelagius’s companion Celestius had

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<sup>16</sup> Quoted by Augustine, *On the Grace of Christ*, xviii.19, NPNF i.5, p.224.

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been convicted at Carthage of heresy, and that Pelagius shared the same opinions. An informal conference was accordingly convened, on July 28, 415, to investigate the charges; both Pelagius and Orosius were present. Orosius was at a disadvantage, first of all in that, unlike Pelagius, he could not speak Greek and had to rely upon a translator, who, as it happened, was not very accurate; and secondly in that, while Pelagius knew John personally and knew how to say the right things around him, Orosius was a headstrong young man who had a talent for offending people. Bishop John evidently became exasperated by Orosius's continual references to Augustine, as to some infallible guru; at one point during the discussion he tried to moderate the young man's zeal by telling him, "I am Augustine around here," to which Orosius, not very tactfully, replied, "If you are Augustine around here, follow Augustine's opinion." All in all, Orosius was probably lucky to come out of the conference with a hung decision; when he saw that things were not going his way, he moved that, as a Western matter, the case be referred for adjudication to the bishop of Rome; Bishop John complied with this request, probably glad to get the earnest young man out of his hair. In December of the same year, a second synod was held in Palestine to try of Pelagius's case, this time in the city of Diospolis (or Lydda); on this occasion, the accusers were two exiled bishops from Gaul named Hero and Lazarus. At this synod, attended by 14 bishops, Pelagius came off even better than at the previous one; by deftly disowning some of the theological statements of his old friend Celestius, and even producing a courteous letter from Augustine to himself,<sup>17</sup> Pelagius found himself exonerated by an official ecclesiastical court. His opinions thus appeared to have received official approval by the Church. It was the high point of his fortunes.

The North African Church, when it heard news of Pelagius's exoneration at the hands of two Greek councils, and of Celestius's ordination as a presbyter at Ephesus, did not take this news lightly. It was a direct affront to their theology, to the teaching on human nature that had been traditional to them from at least the time of St. Cyprian, and they were determined to oppose it. Two North African synods, one at Carthage and one, attended by Augustine, at Milevum in Numidia, were held in the year 416 and declared that both Celestius and Pelagius should be anathematized (that is, cut off from the communion of the Church) unless they renounced various stated opinions. Both synods addressed letters to the bishop of Rome, Innocent I, urging him to take action; another letter to Innocent was written by Augustine and four other African bishops,<sup>18</sup> presenting a more personal, direct appeal. Pope Innocent, having read the Pelagian literature sent him by the African bishops, and being evidently shocked at what he found there, responded by anathematizing Pelagius and Celestius on January 27, 417.

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<sup>17</sup> Augustine, *Letter* 146.

<sup>18</sup> Aurelius, Alypius, Evodius, and Possidius. The letter is Augustine's *Letter* 177.

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News soon reached the West of an incident back East which further embittered the controversy. Sometime in 416, a mob of Pelagius's supporters, emboldened by his victory at Diospolis, attacked Jerome's monastery at Bethlehem, burning down many of its buildings, beating up monks and nuns, and killing a deacon; Jerome escaped injury by fleeing to a tower that had been constructed for defense against Beduin raiders. Although Pelagius was not personally involved, and probably found the attack revolting, it further turned public opinion in the West against him, especially inasmuch as many of the monastics at Jerome's monastery came from influential Roman families. The Pope wrote Bp. John of Jerusalem a harsh letter, castigating him for stupidity and incompetence in his handling of the situation, although it seems that, by the time Innocent wrote the letter, Bp. John had already died.

Pelagius, seeing the tide begin to turn against him, wrote to Pope Innocent a letter in his own defence, together with a confession of faith; likewise Celestius went to Rome to argue his case in person. Before either Celestius or Pelagius's letter got there, however, Innocent had died, in March 417; a new pope was chosen, named Zosimus, who, judging by his name, seems to have been a Greek. Both Celestius and Pelagius's letter arrived just as Zosimus was taking office, and he seems to have been in the mood to reconsider the situation; he lifted his predecessor's excommunications against Pelagius and Celestius, declared, instead, Pelagius's accusers Hero and Lazarus to be excommunicated, and wrote the African Church a pair of letters criticizing them for being overly precipitous in running to condemn Pelagius and for exalting to the level of dogmas matters upon which neither Scripture nor Christian tradition give any clear guidelines; on such matters, he said, one should simply abide by the words of Scripture, and not raise up contentions. He gave the Africans two months in which to prove their case against Pelagius and Celestius.

Zosimus's letters arrived at Africa on the 2nd of November. Before this, on September 23rd, Augustine had been preaching at the cathedral of St. Cyprian in Carthage; rumors were in the air that Rome was changing its position on Pelagius. In the course of his sermon, Augustine said the following: "Two councils have already sent letters to the apostolic see regarding this issue, and rescripts have already come from there. The case is closed: oh that the error may now end!"<sup>19</sup> This statement often is misquoted as: **Roma locuta est, causa finita est**: "Rome has spoken, the case is closed!" If nothing else, this common misquotation points to the fact that more was at stake in the Pelagian Controversy than the doctrine of grace alone, as if that were not enough; what was also being tested was the Church's judicial machinery, as it were, the Roman Church's claim

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<sup>19</sup> Augustine, *Serm.* 131.x.10; text in Bonner, 1963, pp. 342 f.



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to serve as a kind of court of final appeal to the Church as a whole, a claim which, at this time, was by no means universally accepted.

The Africans were down, but not out. They met again in Carthage, and wrote to Zosimus that they were determined to stand by their condemnation of Pelagius until such time as it was clearly shown that he meant by grace, not merely an enlightenment of the intellect, showing the will what it ought to do, but a power enabling it to do it. Resistance to Zosimus's decision began to appear within Italy itself: the bishop of Milan wrote to him that he should not have overturned an earlier pope's decision, and at Rome, where Pelagius had many supporters, a group of influential laymen, strongly opposed to the Pelagians, began to make its voices heard.<sup>20</sup> Zosimus wavered; he backtracked on Celestius, claiming that he had, in fact, come to no final decision regarding him. Tensions at Rome ran high, and, in the Spring of 418, broke out into violence: the Pelagians assaulted one of the anti-Pelagian party, a man named Constantius. This incited the government to take action. On April 30, 418, the Emperor Honorius issued a decree affirming the doctrine of the Fall and commanding that Pelagius, Celestius, and their supporters be banished from Rome. On the following day, May 1, the African Church, meeting in council at Carthage, with over 200 bishops present, issued a series of nine Canons, or dogmatic decrees, condemning Pelagianism in very precise and unequivocal terms.<sup>21</sup> Not only that, but the Council also threatened with excommunication anyone who would question the authority of these canons by an appeal to Rome. The coincidence of these two dates is very striking, and some people have wondered whether some collusion behind the scenes had taken place between the Africans and the Imperial Government. On the whole, that seems unlikely, though it is also clear that the government had very good reasons not to want to lose the support of Africa, which was Rome's chief supplier of grain, at a time when Italy was beginning to suffer from barbarian invasions.

Pope Zosimus, for whatever reasons, now changed his policy. He issued a long letter, the *Epistola Tractatoria* (now lost), which condemned Pelagius and Celestius and affirmed that the doctrines of justifying grace and original sin are **de fide**, that is, matters essential to the Christian faith, to be held by all Christians. He further required that this document

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<sup>20</sup> Prominent among them was the writer Marius Mercator.

<sup>21</sup> "Let him be condemned: who derives death from natural necessity; who denies the presence of original sin in children and rebels against Paul (Rom 5:12); who assigns any form of salvation to unbaptized children; who refers God's justifying grace in Christ merely to past sins; who applies grace to knowledge alone, while not perceiving in it the power necessary to us; who sees in grace merely a means of rendering the good easier, but not its indispensable condition; or who derives the confessions of sin by the pious from humility alone, and interprets their prayer for pardon of guilt as applying solely to the guilt of others." Quoted from Harnack, *History of Dogma*, vol. V (New York: Dover, 1961), p. 185.

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be signed by all bishops, as a test of orthodoxy. Eighteen Italian bishops refused, and were deprived of their sees; chief among them was one Julian, bishop of Eclanum in Apuleia, who in the years to come would become Pelagianism's main defender and Augustine's chief nemesis. As for Pelagius himself, he was condemned by a synod at Antioch and abandoned by his Greek backers; expelled from Jerusalem, he seems to have gone to Egypt, where he disappears from history. Celestius was more self-assertive: after the death of Zosimus, he tried again to argue his case at Rome, but was expelled from Italy; we last see him some years later in Constantinople, where for a time he and the exiled Italian bishops found refuge with the Patriarch Nestorius. But this act of hospitality proved ultimately fatal to the whole Pelagian cause: when, in the year 431, an Ecumenical Council at Ephesus condemned Nestorius himself for heresy regarding the person of Christ, the same council condemned the Pelagians, largely by guilt of association. That ecumenical condemnation was the end of Pelagianism as an option within the Christian Church

## 2. The Controversy over Predestination

I have gone on at some length about the Pelagian Controversy, because it seems to me an essential background for understanding St. Augustine's thought about predestination. The issue of predestination was, for Augustine, a kind of corollary of the doctrine of grace. As he says, "Between grace and predestination there is only this difference, that predestination is the preparation for grace, while grace is the donation itself."<sup>22</sup> Although Augustine's doctrine of predestination had been implied in his teaching on grace all along, it was only at the very end of his life that this doctrine became a focus of discussion, and he was obliged to spell out more clearly the implications of his teaching. What I'd like to do, then, during this second half of my lecture, is to explain, very briefly, what Augustine's teaching on Predestination was, what arguments arose about it, and from there to raise the question, whether this teaching on Predestination makes sense of the New Testament; that is to say, is it true?

In the year 427, three years before the end of Augustine's life, a monk named Florus, visiting Augustine's friend the bishop Evodius, came across in his library a copy of a letter written by St. Augustine nine years earlier; it was addressed to a priest at Rome named Sixtus. Augustine's purpose in the letter was to confirm Sixtus in the doctrine of man's total dependence on the grace of God for salvation. In the course of this letter St. Augustine says some rather uncompromising things: that salvation is a gift, and one cannot earn it; or rather, that one's ability to earn merit before God, to do good works, is itself a gift. All is from grace, Augustine says: both the beginning and the end of the

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<sup>22</sup> *On the Predestination of the Saints*, x.19; NPNF i.5, p. 507.

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process of salvation come to us solely as an act of God's mercy, creating merit but not caused by it. But, if salvation is entirely a gift, and it is even by a gift that we are able to receive this gift, the question naturally arises, why do not all receive it? Augustine answers, with impeccable logic, that it is because it is not given to all. "No man can come to me," Jesus says in the Gospel of John, "except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day" (John 6:44). Augustine takes this text to mean that, if not all are saved, it is because God intends to save only some. The rest are left in their fallen condition, and eternally perish.

The monk Florus, when he came across this letter of Augustine's, had a copy of it written out and sent to his monastery at Hadrumetum in North Africa. He evidently thought that this letter would make for edifying reading to his fellow monks. Instead, it seems to have caused a great deal of anguished soul-searching. For, if salvation is entirely a gift, given without regard to human merit, why be a monk? Why fast, be celibate, pray standing for hours on end, live in poverty, if, in the end, none of this counts for anything in the eyes of God? Augustine's epistle seemed to be producing one or another of two reactions among these readers: it seemed to be an incentive either to negligence or to despair, either, that is, to the inference that, if God saves human beings totally by grace, work is unnecessary, or that, if God saves totally by grace, there is nothing one can do to be saved.

The abbot of the monastery, a man named Valentinus, was troubled by the debates among his monks that this letter had engendered. Many of his monks were simple men, with little formal education, and were unable to appreciate subtle distinctions made by learned theologians. Valentinus wrote first to Bishop Evodius for guidance on how to interpret this text. The answer he received was perhaps more pious than helpful, emphasizing that God's judgments are mysterious and that one must read the Scriptures and the writings of the Fathers with humility, not expecting to understand everything all at once. By this time, some of the monks from Hadrumetum had come and visited St. Augustine in person, informing him of the situation.

Augustine first responded by addressing a few letters to the abbot Valentinus. In them he notes, first of all, that his letter to Sixtus had been written for a specific purpose: namely, to combat the Pelagians who claim that grace is given according to our merits. He further notes that, within St. Paul's own writings, there are indications that some people in his own day misunderstood St. Paul's teaching on grace, inferring from it, "Let us do evil, that good may come" (Rom 3:8). Since, Augustine says, in his anti-Pelagian writings he is dealing with the same issue that preoccupied St. Paul, that is, grace, it is not surprising if his writings engender similar misunderstandings.

Moreover, St. Augustine emphasizes to Valentinus that he does not teach that what we do doesn't matter in the eyes of God. The Scriptures, both the Old Testament and the

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New, are very clear that God “will render to every man according to his works” (Rom 2:6), and that we reap what we sow (Gal 6:7). Nevertheless, Augustine is convinced that our works are useless unless done in faith; and faith itself is a gift. As St. Paul says, “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God” (Eph 2:8). Perhaps the balance St. Augustine is trying to achieve between God’s action and the human response is best expressed by St. Paul in another passage. In his letter to the Philippians, ch. 2, Paul writes:

“Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure” (Phil 2:12-13).

That is to say, grace should be no incentive either to sloth or to despair: one is called to work out one’s own salvation with fear and trembling, giving thanks for everything, knowing that even one’s ability to work is God’s gift.

Besides his letters, Augustine also addressed to the monks of Hadrumetum two treatises, one titled *On Grace and Free Will*, the other *On Rebuke and Grace*. The one addressed the monks’ complaint that predestination seems to do away with free will; the other answered the objection that it seems to follow from the doctrine of predestination that it is useless to try to correct people for their sins, since if they are predestinated they will necessarily repent and if they aren’t they won’t. In the first of these books Augustine goes to great lengths to show that grace and free will, in his sense of the term, are completely compatible: it is grace that makes a person concretely free by freeing such a person from the passions and instilling a love of the good. As Jesus says (John 8:36), “If the Son ... shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.” In the latter book, Augustine dismisses the objection to his doctrine by saying that, just as God foreknows who is to be saved, he also foreknows the means by which those who are to be saved shall be saved, one of which means may well be the rebuke of sins. He also brings up in this book, for the first time, the issue of Perseverance — that is, not only attaining faith, but remaining in faith till the end of one’s life, is a gift of God, and that gift is not given to all, since not all who begin in faith end up so. Whether these treatises allayed the situation at Hadrumetum is not known. What is known is that they produced a kind of chain reaction elsewhere.

These treatises soon began to circulate among Christians in Southern Gaul. We learn of the effect caused by them from two letters sent to Augustine in 428, one by a man named Prosper, from Aquitaine, the other by a certain Hilary. Both of these men were ardent supporters of Augustine and his teaching. Both reported, however, that among monastic circles in Southern Gaul, particularly in the city of Marseilles, the views on predestination expressed in Augustine’s writings were causing widespread disquiet. This was so, even

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though among these monastic circles there was general agreement with Augustine's teaching that, in Adam, all sinned, and that no one can be saved by his or her own works, but only by rebirth through the grace of God. Prosper, in his letter, calls these monks the **reliquiae Pelagianorum**, the "remnants of the Pelagians," because he believed that denial of any part of Augustine's doctrine led to the view that human beings are saved by their own merit; the name "Semi-Pelagians," often applied to them, was a later term, invented during the quarrels of the Counter-Reformation. Both of these terms carry insinuations of heresy which may well be undeserved; it is probably best to refer to them simply as "the monks of Marseilles." Chief among these men was a monk named John Cassian, the abbot of the monastery of St. Victor at Marseilles, a man revered by the Orthodox Church as St. John Cassian. He had served as a deacon under St. John Chrysostom at Constantinople and had studied among the monks of the Egyptian deserts; he is considered to be the chief mediator of Eastern monastic traditions to the Christian West. In his book *The Conferences*, he presents a very different view of the workings of divine grace and human freedom from that which is found in Augustine, one which emphasizes that salvation is a **synergy**, a working-together, between God and man.

What Cassian and the other monks of Marseilles chiefly disagreed with in Augustine's teaching on predestination was the implication, which Augustine did not hesitate to draw, that God's will to save fallen humankind is limited to certain individuals who, because God's will is infallible, cannot *not* be saved, while the rest of the human race, because such effectual calling is not provided to them, effectively cannot be saved. They regarded this teaching, Prosper of Aquitaine says, as "opposed to the opinion of the Fathers and to the mind of the Church."<sup>23</sup> They apparently viewed it as a revival of the old Gnostic teaching that human beings possess fundamentally differing natures: according to the Valentinians, one of the most important of the Gnostic sects in the second century A.D., all human beings fall into one or another of three categories: there are the **pneumatikoi**, the "spiritual people," who are necessarily saved and cannot forfeit their salvation in any way; there are the **hylikoi**, the "material people," who have no trace of mind at all and were apparently made only as a kind of lumber to stoke eternal bonfires — such people cannot possibly be saved; and, in the third place, there is an intermediate category, the **psychikoi**, the "soulish" people, that is to say, normal, everyday, run-of-the-mill people who are neither completely obtuse in their understanding nor godlike supermen but who, in their bumbling, haphazard way, sometimes make the right choices and sometimes stumble; the Gnostics tended to see the vast majority of Christians as belonging to this third category, and taught that such people would be either saved or not saved, depending upon their moral endeavor. The category of "spiritual people," the

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<sup>23</sup> Letter 225, Prosper to Augustine, §2.



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necessarily saved, they not surprisingly identified with themselves; the “material people,” the necessarily not-saved, they tended to identify with whatever class of persons they happened especially to dislike. The kind of elitism represented by such teaching was strongly opposed by the fathers of the early Church, by such people as St. Irenaeus of Lyons, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen, who stressed, in line with the Scriptures, that all men are sinners and are in need of the mercy and grace of God, and equally stressed that, in Jesus Christ, God’s mercy and grace are freely offered to everyone, and that all are free either to accept or to reject it. There is no ineluctable fate hanging over our actions or our destinies, they said: believe, and you’ll be saved; don’t believe, and you’ll suffer the consequences of your own free decision. For such writers, the language of Scripture which speaks of God “predestinating” or “electing” certain people to salvation means simply this: that God, from all eternity, has known who would say yes to his offer and who would say no, and that, to those who say yes, God provides all the means necessary to bring them, through all the trials of life, to their desired destination. It is not from any lack of love on God’s part that some do not believe; if anything, it is a sign of God’s love that he refuses to turn human beings into robots or marionettes that are compelled to love him necessarily. “God is love,” as St. John says in his first epistle; it is not that God is love towards one person and not-love towards another person, but God is love, in and of himself; he loves both those who love him and those who hate him; as Jesus says, he “makes his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (Matt 5:45). Part of that love, clearly, is that he allows people the use of their own faculties and to make their own choices, even where those choices result in a rejection of love. For the fathers of the early Church, to deny any of this is to deny the basic character of God, as shown forth in Christian revelation.

Now the monks of Marseilles were basically claiming that the effect of St. Augustine’s teaching on predestination was to do just that, that is, to deny this basic character of God as good and loving towards all. In particular, they regarded Augustine’s teaching as in flat contradiction to the claim made in St. Paul’s first letter to Timothy, ch. 2, v. 4, that God “desires all men to be saved, and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” What I would like to do, for the remainder of this lecture, is to examine whether this charge is justified, the charge, namely, that Augustine’s teaching on predestination marks a fundamental break with traditional Christian teaching, and turns the God of love into something else. And, one way or another, I would like to make it clear what he saw as the scriptural grounds of his teaching, since Augustine did not pull this teaching out of thin air, nor out of the Manichaeic and Platonist books to which he had previously been addicted, but, in his own view at least, he pulled it out of the New Testament.

In the first place, one needs to stress the point that St. Augustine’s teaching on grace and predestination changed over the course of his life as a Christian. For about the first decade

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of his life in the Church, Augustine interpreted those texts which speak of God's "predestinating" people very much in the way earlier fathers had done: that is, he understood the grounds of God's predestinating certain people to salvation to be God's foreknowledge of the assent these people would give, of their own free will, to God's offer of salvation in Jesus Christ; in other words, God predestined those whom he foresaw would believe. For instance, in a short book titled, "An Exposition of Certain Propositions from the Epistle to the Romans" (*Expositio quarundam Propositionum ex Epistula ad Romanos*), written around the beginning of the year 394, Augustine has this to say on the text of Romans ch. 8, vv. 28-30: "Not all that were called, were called according to [God's] purpose (**secundum propositum**): for this purpose is closely bound up with the foreknowledge and pre-determination of God: and he did not pre-determine anyone, unless he foreknew that such a one would believe and would follow his own call: these are those he also calls 'chosen.'"<sup>24</sup> On Romans 9:11-13, where St. Paul cites the words of the Prophet Malachi, "Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated," Augustine says, "By these (words) some are moved to think that the Apostle Paul has done away with free will, by which we gain God's favour by the good of piety, or alienate him by the evil of impiety."<sup>25</sup> But, Augustine continues, God knew even before Jacob and Esau were born what each of them was going to be like. On the same passage, Augustine further states that "it pertains to us to believe and to will, it pertains to [God] to give to those who believe and will the power to work well through the Holy Spirit, through whom the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts to make us merciful."<sup>26</sup> In his book the *Retractions* written late in his life, Augustine finds fault with this statement and tries to correct it as follows: "Both things (that is, both believing and willing) are from him (that is, God), since it is he himself who prepares the will; and both of them are ours, since it does not come about except through our own volition."<sup>27</sup>

Throughout the decade of the 390's St. Augustine was engaged in an intense study of the writings of St. Paul. He at one point planned a massive commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, but broke it off after writing about twenty pages and only getting as far as v. 7 of the first chapter. Partly this engagement with Paul was due to the fact that, from the time of his baptism in the year 387, Augustine had been involved in public debates with the Manichees, the esoteric sect to which he had formerly belonged, who appealed to St. Paul's writings in support of their own doctrines. Partly, again, it was due to a love of St. Paul which predated Augustine's conversion: those of you who have read the *Confessions* will remember that, at the climactic moment of Augustine's conversion,

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<sup>24</sup> Prop. 55; cited from Alexander Souter, *Earliest Latin Commentaries on the Epistles of St. Paul* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927), p. 186, with slight modifications.

<sup>25</sup> Souter, op. cit., p. 187.

<sup>26</sup> Prop. 61, Souter, op. cit., p. 187, altered.

<sup>27</sup> Retr. I.23.3.

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when he hears in the garden a child's voice singing "tolle lege, tolle lege," "take up and read, take up and read," the book that he picked up, lying near at hand, was a copy of St. Paul's epistles, and the words that he first came upon, which broke through all his self-doubt and hesitation, were from Romans ch. 13: "... not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying; but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh to fulfil the lusts thereof" (Rom. 13:13-14). So St. Paul was an author who had had a particular hold upon St. Augustine for a long time; if the account he gives in the *Confessions* is to be trusted, and I don't see why it shouldn't, it was especially Paul's description of the dividedness of the human will in Romans ch. 7 that seemed to Augustine to give a precise diagnosis of his own spiritual condition. At first Augustine's view was that this chapter, strictly speaking, describes man's condition under the Law, where one knows what is right to do but lacks the strength to do it; under the Gospel, he believed, people would not have such problems; their lives would be a continual growth towards spiritual perfection and maturity. As St. Augustine began to have more experience of Christianity, however, and, in particular, when as a priest and then as a bishop he began to gain a clearer picture of the practical moral problems faced by people in his own congregations, the relevancy of ch. 7 of Romans even for those in the Church more and more impressed itself upon Augustine's mind; and, together with this, it seems, came an increasing realization of the absolute centrality of grace in the Christian life. Both Augustine and Pelagius, one might say, faced a similar problem: both of them were moral reformers, who were distressed to observe that the behavior of professing Christians was often little better than that of pagans; yet they went about addressing this problem in radically different ways. Pelagius addressed it by preaching the absolute necessity for keeping God's law and the inalienable natural capacity of our wills to do just that: not even sin, he said, can take away our freedom of choice, and if we do sin we have no one to blame but ourselves; we cannot pin the fault on Adam or anyone else. Augustine, while agreeing about the necessity to keep the commandments, a necessity which is just as valid under the new covenant as it was under the old, came more and more to see man as totally dependent upon God for any good that he is able to do; that without the enlivening power of the Holy Spirit, the law, even Jesus's commandments in the New Testament, constitutes what St. Paul calls "the letter that kills"; and that, if the Christian thinks he is able to serve God out of his own natural resources, that he can, as it were, give to God and demand a payment in return, he is sunk. This realization gathered strength for Augustine throughout the decade of the 390's, as he applied himself to the study of St. Paul; it came to a head for him in the year 396, at the very time that he began to serve as bishop of Hippo.

In that year, Augustine received a letter from his old friend the priest Simplicianus of Milan. Simplicianus had played an instrumental role in Augustine's conversion ten years earlier. Now the roles of teacher and student were reversed, and Simplicianus was asking

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Augustine for help in understanding certain difficult passages of scripture. One of them was ch. 9 of Romans. We have already spoken briefly of the interpretation Augustine gave to certain verses of this chapter two years earlier. At that time, Augustine still held to the view that predestination is subordinate to God's foreknowledge: God predestines to salvation those whom he foresees will believe. Now, around the end of the year 396, Augustine begins for the first time to take a different view of the matter. He discusses the question in Book I, Question 2 of his work *To Simplician — On Diverse Questions (De Diversis Quaestionibus ad Simplicianum)*. The exposition covers Romans ch. 9 from v. 10 to v. 29. Augustine first notes, concerning verse 10, that Rebecca conceived in her womb the twins Jacob and Esau "by one act of conception" (**ex uno concubitu**); this rules out the idea that the difference in character between the two was caused by some astrological necessity. Then Augustine turns to vv. 11-12: "*For the children being not yet born, neither having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of him that calleth, it was said unto her, the elder shall serve the younger.*" "Grace is therefore of him who calls," Augustine observes, "and the consequent good works are of him who receives grace." That is to say, if Jacob has been called in preference to Esau, it is not because of any good works Jacob has done: his good works are a consequence of God's calling him. But then Augustine raises the question, how can one of them be called in preference to the other, if neither of them yet exist? If they do not yet exist, on what grounds can a distinction between the two be made? Augustine asks, "How can election be just, indeed how can there be any kind of election, where there is no difference? If Jacob was elected before he was born and before he had done anything at all, for no merit of his own, he could not have been elected at all, there being nothing to distinguish him for election. If Esau was rejected for no fault of his own because he too was not born and had done nothing when it was said, 'The elder shall serve the younger,' how can his rejection be said to be just?"<sup>28</sup> Augustine seems here to raise exactly the questions that the passage naturally suggests. He is not skirting the basic, troubling issue, which is: How can God be just if he chooses or rejects people prior to their having done anything at all?

Augustine next considers the option that God has chosen Jacob in preference to Esau on account of his foreknowledge.

"Could it be 'according to election' because God has foreknowledge of all things, and foresaw the faith that was to be in Jacob even before he was born? ... [But] if election is by foreknowledge, and God foresaw Jacob's faith, how do you prove that he did not elect him for his works?"<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> §4; Burleigh, tr., pp. 388 f.

<sup>29</sup> §5; p. 389.

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“The question is whether faith merits a man’s justification, whether the merits of faith do not precede the mercy of God; or whether, in fact, faith itself is to be numbered among the gifts of grace. Notice that in this passage when he said, ‘Not of works,’ he did not say, ‘but of faith it was said to her, The elder shall serve the younger.’ No, he said, ‘but of him that calleth.’ No one believes who is not called. God calls in his mercy, and not as rewarding the merits of faith. The merits of faith follow his calling rather than precede it.”<sup>30</sup>

In making this exegetical move, in asserting that it was not out of God’s foreknowledge of Jacob’s faith that Jacob was chosen but, on the contrary, it was God’s choosing and calling of Jacob that produced in him the merits of faith, Augustine has stated for the first time that doctrine of grace that he would hold for the rest of his life. His whole doctrine of predestination flows out of the realization he comes to in writing this book. Years later, near the end of his life, Augustine speaks of it as having been a turning-point for him.

“In the solution of this question I labored indeed on behalf of the free choice of the human will, but God’s grace overcame, and I could only reach that point where the apostle is perceived to have said with the most evident truth, ‘For who maketh thee to differ? and what hast thou that thou hast not received? Now, if thou hast received it, why dost thou glory as if thou receivedst it not?’ (1 Cor 4:7) ... It was chiefly by this apostolic testimony that I myself had been convinced, when I thought otherwise concerning this matter; and this God revealed to me as I sought to solve this question when I was writing, as I said, to the Bishop Simplicianus.”<sup>31</sup>

I have to confess that, as an interpretation of what St. Paul is saying in chapter 9 of Romans, St. Augustine’s reading seems to me, on the face of it, to make a lot of sense. Perhaps the clinching argument for me is the following one: if in fact what St. Paul had really meant to say was that, when God eternally chooses one person over another, he does so out of a prevision and foreknowledge of what these people are actually going to do in their lives, why couldn’t he just have said so? Why, when Paul acknowledges his doctrine as a stumbling-block to reason, and presents an anonymous objector as raising the question, “Why doth he yet find fault? For who hath resisted his will?” could Paul not have answered that unbelieving human beings resist God’s will, God is simply rendering to people what they themselves have deserved through their own choices? Are we to suppose that such a simple, rational answer was beyond St. Paul’s powers of expression? Instead, St. Paul answers in a way that seems almost calculated to offend and disturb. He cites the old prophetic image of God as a potter, doing what he wants to do with the clay pots of his own making. As Augustine points out, there is one lump of clay:

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<sup>30</sup> §7, p. 391.

<sup>31</sup> *On the Predestination of the Saints*, iv.8, NPNF i.5, p. 502.



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all human beings are sinners, made from the same stock of fallen Adam, and if God were simply to render to people what they themselves have deserved, he would throw out the whole batch. No one has “deserved” salvation; it is an act of God’s mercy. God’s reasons for choosing to have mercy upon one person while allowing another person to continue in unrepentance are ultimately mysterious: they relate to the sovereignty of his will. As God is just, St. Augustine says, one must assume that he has just reasons for the choices he makes of one person over another; but we don’t know them. St. Paul himself doesn’t claim to know them. Instead, he speaks of God’s judgments as unsearchable: “O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counsellor?” (Rom 11:33-34). If Paul had had some more rationally comprehensible answer to give, Augustine says, he would have given it. This is why the interpretation that predestination is based on foreknowledge doesn’t make sense to Augustine, as an explanation of St. Paul’s teaching in Romans ch. 9. And I have to say that, for all its harshness and offensiveness to reason, this seems to me an honest interpretation of what the text is saying.

Now, it seems to me that at least one important test of whether St. Augustine has rightly interpreted this passage is to see if this interpretation agrees with what is found elsewhere in Scripture. Such a test, I think, if rigorously applied, would produce mixed results. Certain New Testament texts likewise seem to speak of an absolute predestination to salvation, for instance the text already cited, “No one can come to me except the Father which hath sent me draw him” (John 6:44). Other texts are more ambiguous. For instance, in ch. 8 of Romans, St. Paul says that “those whom he (that is, God) foreknew, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son” (Rom 8:29). Now Augustine reads “foreknew” here in the strong sense of meaning “foreknew with an intention to save,” as at Rom 11:2 Paul says, “God hath not cast away his people which he foreknew.” On the other hand, it could equally be argued that both of these verses refer to a foreknowledge of people’s faith, as the grounds for God’s choice. That at least is the reading most of the Greek fathers give of these verses, and their reading of these verses then is made the basis of their interpretation of more overtly predestinarian passages like Romans 9 and John 6. Origen, for instance, thinks that Paul’s use of the figure of the potter in Romans 9 should be compared with something Paul says elsewhere: in the Second Letter to Timothy (which, if it is really by Paul, is probably the last thing written by him), St. Paul says the following:

“But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and of silver, but also of wood and of earth; and some to honour, and some to dishonour. If a man therefore purge himself from these, he shall be a vessel unto honour, sanctified, and meet for the master’s use, and prepared unto every good work.” (2 Tim 2:20-21)

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In this passage, St. Paul seems to say that being a vessel appointed to honor is a matter of one's own choosing. That seems to mitigate considerably the force of Paul's argument in Romans 9 concerning God's forming vessels of mercy and vessels of wrath.

Perhaps the greatest obstacle to accepting St. Augustine's interpretation of Romans are those passages of Scripture which explicitly declare the universality of God's saving will. For instance, 1 Tim 2:4, God "desires all men to be saved, and to come to the knowledge of the truth." Again, the prophet Ezekiel: "As I live, saith the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the wicked: but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways: for why will ye die, O house of Israel?" (Ezek 33:11). Again, in the Book of Wisdom, which Augustine accepted as canonical Scripture, it reads: "For thou lovest all the things that are, and abhorrest nothing which thou hast made: for never wouldst thou have made any thing, if thou hadst hated it" (Wisd 11:24), a text Augustine finds he has to reconcile with the statement, "Esau have I hated." Again, when Jesus laments over Jerusalem — "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!" (Matt 23:37; Lk 13:34) — it seems to indicate that God's willingness to save is thwarted by human obstinacy and unbelief. How then does St. Augustine reconcile such texts with his reading of Romans?

As for the passage in Ezekiel, it is easy enough for Augustine to find texts in scripture which balance the commandment to turn with a recognition that the power to turn comes from God himself: "Turn me, and I shall be turned," says the prophet Jeremiah (Jer 31:18). For Augustine, the command "Turn ye" and the prayer "Turn me" go together: the one is of law, the other is of grace; the one tells us what to do, the other asks God for strength in order to do it. Augustine in fact cites this as a concrete example of what he means when he prays "Give what thou commandest": God commands us to turn, and faith asks God for strength to be able to do so. Again, Augustine thinks that the text, "Thou hatest nothing which thou hast made," applies to Esau as well as to others: God made Esau a man, he didn't make him a sinner; he loves in him that which he made, the man, he hates in him that which he didn't make, the sin.

Yet it may still be questioned whether Augustine has taken these statements which indicate the universality of God's saving will sufficiently seriously. Here and there in his writings, St. Augustine gives various interpretations of the statement in 1 Timothy that God desires all to be saved. Early on in the Pelagian controversy, in his book *On the Spirit and the Letter* (xxxiii.58), Augustine is still able to adduce this text as self-evident and needing no comment. But as the debate wore on and Augustine's views became more hardened, he felt compelled to give the text some explication that would not contradict

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his views on the particular, effectual calling of the elect. He tried different possibilities: that “all” means “many,” or “some from all nations,” or “all whom God chooses to save,” or that the term “all” is restricted in its scope, just as, if one were to say, “All are obliged to study Ancient Greek,” the statement would be true if uttered at St. John’s College and untrue if uttered most anyplace else. None of these explanations are completely convincing. What is most troubling about this attempt to limit the scope of God’s salvific will is that it leads inevitably to what the Calvinists call the “doctrine of limited atonement,” that is, a denial of the assertion that Christ died for all. Such a denial is completely unscriptural, given the many statements in the New Testament to the contrary;<sup>32</sup> and one can only suppose that, if rigorously held to, it would produce a particularly merciless form of the Christian religion.

It is time for me to bring this lecture to a close. My suspicion is that St. Augustine is genuinely on to something in his interpretation of Scripture, his teaching that human beings are chosen by God before the foundation of the world, without regard to their merits. There are statements in the New Testament which are entirely too explicit to allow one to suppose that Augustine’s understanding of the grounds of our election is entirely wrong — such as, for instance, the text, “It is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy” (Rom 9:16). Nevertheless, the conclusions Augustine logically derives from this understanding of election seem inconsistent with the general character of God as shown forth in the New Testament — in particular, God’s willingness to save all, and Christ’s dying for the redemption of all. I have to suppose that, however sunk human beings may be in sin, however attenuated our ability to choose the good on account of moral degradation, God gives to all human beings at least at some point in their lives the chance to say yes or no, and that he respects our decision. Certainly God prepares the will, as Augustine says — that without the grace of God, none of us could ever come to him. Yet it equally has to be stressed that God forces no one. In the Book of Revelation there is a verse which I think illustrates what I am trying to say. In ch. 3, v. 20, at the end of the Spirit’s testimony to the seven churches of Asia, Jesus says this: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any man hear my voice, and open to me, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.” It should be noted here that Jesus does not say that he stands outside the door with a crowbar or with a battering-ram, but that he stands outside and knocks. Opening the door remains a human decision; God doesn’t force it. Nevertheless, what actually brings a human being to open the door remains deeply mysterious. If for nothing else, Augustine should be thanked for pointing that out.

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<sup>32</sup> See 2 Cor 5:14-15, “For the love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead”; 1 Tim 4:10; Titus 2:11.

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