

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

The Pelagian Controversy

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“Grant what Thou commandest, and command what Thou dost desire.” This passage from the pen of Saint Augustine of Hippo was the teaching of the great theologian that provoked one of the most important controversies in the history of the church, and one that was roused to fury in the early years of the fifth century.



The provocation of this prayer stimulated a British monk by the name of Pelagius to react strenuously against its contents. When Pelagius came to Rome sometime in the first decade of the fifth century, he was appalled by the moral laxity he observed among professing Christians and even among the clergy. He attributed much of this malaise to the implications of the teaching of Saint Augustine, namely that righteousness could only be achieved by Christians with the special help of divine grace.

With respect to Augustine's prayer, "Oh God, grant what Thou commandest, and command what Thou dost desire," Pelagius had no problems with the second part. He believed that God's highest attribute was indeed His righteousness, and from that righteousness He had the perfect right Himself to obligate His creatures to obey Him according to His law. It was the first part of the prayer that exercised Pelagius, in which Augustine asked God to grant what He commands. Pelagius reacted by saying that whatever God commands implies the ability of the one who receives the command to obey it. Man should not have to ask for grace in order to be obedient.

Now, this discussion broadened into further debates concerning the nature of Adam's fall, the extent of corruption in our humanity that we describe under the rubric "original sin," and the doctrine of baptism.

It was the position of Pelagius that Adam's sin affected Adam and only Adam. That is to say, as a result of Adam's transgression there was no change wrought in the constituent nature of the human race. Man was born in a state of righteousness, and as one created in the image of God, he was created immutably so. Even though it was possible for him to sin, it was not possible for him to lose his basic human nature, which was capable always and everywhere to be obedient. Pelagius went on to say that it is, even after the

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sin of Adam, possible for every human being to live a life of perfect righteousness and that, indeed, some have achieved such status.

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Pelagius was not opposed to grace, only to the idea that grace was necessary for obedience. He maintained that grace facilitates obedience but is not a necessary prerequisite for obedience. There is no transfer of guilt from Adam to his progeny nor any change in human nature as a subsequence of the fall. The only negative impact Adam had on his progeny was that of setting a bad example, and if those who follow in the pathway of Adam imitate his disobedience, they will share in his guilt, Pelagius asserted, but only by being actually guilty themselves. There can be no transfer or imputation of guilt from one man to another according to the teaching of Pelagius. On the other side, Augustine argued that the fall seriously impaired the moral ability of the human race. Indeed, the fall of Adam plunged all of humanity into the ruinous state of original sin. Original sin does not refer to the first sin of Adam and Eve, but refers to the consequences for the human race of that first sin. It refers to God's judgment upon the whole human race by which He visits upon us the effects of Adam's sin by the thoroughgoing corruption of all of his descendents. Paul develops this theme in the fifth chapter of his epistle to the Romans.

The key issue for Augustine in this controversy was the issue of fallen man's moral ability — or lack thereof. Augustine argued that prior to the fall, Adam and Eve enjoyed a free will as well as moral liberty. The will is the faculty by which choices are made. Liberty refers to the ability to use that faculty to embrace the things of God. After the fall, Augustine said the will, or the faculty, of choosing remained intact; that is, human beings are still free in the sense that they can choose what they want to choose. However, their choices are deeply influenced by the bondage of sin that holds them in a corrupt state. And as a result of that bondage to sin, the original liberty that Adam and Eve enjoyed before the fall was lost.

The only way that moral liberty could be restored would be through God's supernatural work of grace in the soul. This renewal of liberty is what the Bible calls a "royal" liberty ([James 2:8](#)). Therefore, the crux of the matter had to do with the issue of moral inability as the heart of original sin. The controversy yielded several church verdicts including the

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judgment of the church in a synod in the year 418, where the Council of Carthage condemned the teachings of Pelagius. The heretic was exiled to Constantinople in 429. And once again, Pelagianism was condemned by the church at the Council of Ephesus in 431. Throughout church history, again and again, unvarnished Pelagianism has been repudiated by Christian orthodoxy. Even the Council of Trent, which teaches a form of semi-Pelagianism, in its first three canons — especially in the sixth chapter on justification — repeats the church's ancient condemnation of the teaching of Pelagius that men can be righteous apart from grace. Even as recently as the modern Roman Catholic catechism, that condemnation is continued.

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In our own day, the debate between Pelagianism and Augustinianism may be seen as the debate between humanism and Christianity. Humanism is a warmed-over variety of Pelagianism. However, the struggle within the church now is between the Augustinian view and various forms of semi-Pelagianism, which seeks a middle ground between the views of Pelagius and Augustine. Semi-Pelagianism teaches that grace is necessary to achieve righteousness, but that this grace is not imparted to the sinner unilaterally or sovereignly as is maintained by Reformed theology. Rather, the semi-Pelagian argues that the individual makes the initial step of faith before that saving grace is given. Thus, God imparts the grace of faith in conjunction with the sinner's work in seeking God. It seems a little mixing of grace and works doesn't worry the semi-Pelagian. It is our task, however, if we are to be faithful first to Scripture and then to the church's ancient councils, to discern Augustine's truth and defend it aright.

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