

# Augustine and Pelagius

By R. C. Sproul

**"It is Augustine who gave us the Reformation."** So wrote B. B. Warfield in his assessment of the influence of Augustine on church history. It is not only that Luther was an Augustinian monk, or that Calvin quoted Augustine more than any other theologian that provoked Warfield's remark. Rather, it was that the Reformation witnessed the ultimate triumph of Augustine's doctrine of grace over the legacy of the Pelagian view of man.

Humanism, in all its subtle forms, recapitulates the unvarnished Pelagianism against which Augustine struggled. Though Pelagius was condemned as a heretic by Rome, and its modified form, Semi-Pelagianism was likewise condemned by the Council of Orange in 529, the basic assumptions of this view persisted throughout church history to reappear in Medieval Catholicism, Renaissance Humanism, Socinianism, Arminianism, and modern Liberalism. The seminal thought of Pelagius survives today not as a trace or tangential influence but is pervasive in the modern church. Indeed, the modern church is held captive by it.

What was the core issue between Augustine and Pelagius? The heart of the debate centered on the doctrine of original sin, particularly with respect to the question of the extent to which the will of fallen man is "free." Adolph Harnack said:

There has never, perhaps, been another crisis of equal importance in church history in which the opponents have expressed the principles at issue so clearly and abstractly. The Arian dispute before the Nicene Council can alone be compared with it. (History of Agmer V/IV/3)

The controversy began when the British monk, Pelagius, opposed at Rome Augustine's famous prayer: "Grant what Thou commandest, and command what Thou dost desire." Pelagius recoiled in horror at the idea that a divine gift (grace) is necessary to perform what God commands. For Pelagius and his followers responsibility always implies ability. If man has the moral responsibility to obey the law of God, he must also have the moral ability to do it.

Harnack summarizes Pelagian thought:

Nature, free-will, virtue and law, these strictly defined and made independent of the notion of God - were the catch-words of Pelagianism: self-acquired virtue is the supreme good which is followed by reward. Religion and morality lie in the sphere of the free spirit; they are at any moment by man's own effort.

The difference between Pelagianism and Semi-Pelagianism is more a difference of degree than of kind. To be sure, on the surface there seems like there is a huge difference between the two, particularly with respect to original sin and to the sinner's dependence upon grace. Pelagius categorically denied the doctrine of original sin, arguing that Adam's sin affected Adam alone and that infants at birth are in the same state as Adam was before the Fall. Pelagius also argued that though grace may facilitate the achieving of righteousness, it is not necessary to that end. Also, he insisted that the constituent nature of humanity is not convertible; it is indestructively good.

Over against Pelagius, Semi-Pelagianism does have a doctrine of original sin whereby mankind is considered fallen. Consequently grace not only facilitates virtue, it is necessary for virtue to ensue. Man's nature can be changed and has been changed by the Fall.

However, in Semi-Pelagianism there remains a moral ability within man that is unaffected by the Fall. We call this an "island of righteousness" by which the fallen sinner still has the inherent ability to incline or move himself to cooperate with God's grace. Grace is necessary but not necessarily effective. Its effect always depends upon the sinner's cooperation with it by virtue of the exercise of the will.

It is not by accident that Martin Luther considered *The Bondage of the Will* to be his most important book. He saw in Erasmus a man who, despite his protests to the contrary, was a Pelagian in Catholic clothing. Luther saw that lurking beneath the controversy of merit and grace, and faith and works was the issue of to what degree the human will is enslaved by sin and to what degree we are dependent upon grace for our liberation. Luther argued from the Bible that the flesh profits nothing and that this "nothing" is not a little "something."

Augustine's view of the Fall was opposed to both Pelagianism and Semi-Pelagianism. He said that mankind is a *massa peccati*, a "mess of sin," incapable of raising itself from spiritual death. For Augustine man can no more move or incline himself to God than an empty glass can fill itself. For Augustine the initial work of divine grace by which the soul is liberated from the bondage of sin is sovereign and operative. To be sure we cooperate with this grace, but only after the initial divine work of liberation.

Augustine did not deny that fallen man still has a will and that the will is capable of making choices. He argued that fallen man still has a free will (*liberium arbitrium*) but has lost his moral liberty (*libertas*). The state of original sin leaves us in the wretched condition of being unable to refrain from sinning. We still are able to choose what we desire, but our desires remain chained by our evil impulses. He argued that the freedom that remains in the will always leads to sin. Thus in the flesh we are free only to sin, a hollow freedom indeed. It is freedom without liberty, a real moral bondage. True liberty can only come from without, from the work of God on the soul. Therefore we are not only partly dependent upon grace for our conversion but totally dependent upon grace.

Modern Evangelicalism sprung from the Reformation whose roots were planted by Augustine. But today the Reformational and Augustinian view of grace is all but eclipsed in Evangelicalism. Where Luther triumphed in the sixteenth century, subsequent generations gave the nod to Erasmus.

Modern evangelicals repudiate unvarnished Pelagianism and frequently Semi-Pelagianism as well. It is insisted that grace is necessary for salvation and that man is fallen. The will is acknowledged to be severely weakened even to the point of being "99 percent" dependent upon grace for its liberation. But that one percent of unaffected moral ability or spiritual power which becomes the decisive difference between salvation and perdition is the link that preserves the chain to Pelagius. We have not broken free from the Pelagian captivity of the church.

That one percent is the "little something" Luther sought to demolish because it removes the *sola* from *sola gratia* and ultimately the *sola* from *sola fide*. The irony may be that though modern Evangelicalism loudly and repeatedly denounces Humanism as the mortal enemy of Christianity, it entertains a Humanistic view of man and of the will at its deepest core.

We need an Augustine or a Luther to speak to us anew lest the light of God's grace be not only over-shadowed but be obliterated in our time.