Pelagian Heresy

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The Pelagian Controversy

➤ *"You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace."* (Galatians 5:4)

➤ The Pelagian controversy, which erupted in the early fifth century, brought a cluster of questions concerning human nature, sin, and grace into sharp focus.

➤ Up to this point, there had been relatively little controversy within the church over human nature.

➤ The Pelagian controversy changed that, and ensured that the issues associated with human nature were placed firmly on the agenda of the western church.

➤ The controversy centered upon two individuals: Saint Augustine, Bishop of Hippo and the British Monk Pelagius the heretic.

The Freedom Of The Will

➤ **For St. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo:**

➤ The total sovereignty of God and genuine human responsibility and freedom must be upheld at one and the same time, if justice is to be done to the richness and complexity of the biblical statements on the matter.

➤ To simplify the matter, a denial of either the sovereignty of God or human freedom, is to seriously compromise the Christian understanding of the way in which God justifies man.

In a Nutshell

➢ St. Augustine's basic ideas can be summarized as follows:

➢ First, natural human freedom is affirmed: we do not do things out of any necessity, but as a matter of freedom.

➢ Second, human free will has been weakened and incapacitated — but not eliminated or destroyed — through sin.

Clarification (Part 1)

➢ In order for that human will to be restored and healed, it requires the operation of divine grace.

➢ Free will really does exist; it is, however, distorted by sin.

➢ In order to explain this point, St. Augustine deploys a significant analogy.

➢ Consider a pair of scales, with two balance pans. One balance pan represents good, and the other evil.

➢ If the pan were properly balanced, the arguments in favor of doing good or doing evil could be weighed, and a proper conclusion drawn.

➢ The parallel with the human free will is obvious: We weigh up the arguments in favor of doing good and evil, and act accordingly.

Clarification (Part 2)

➢ But what, asks St. Augustine, if the balance pans are loaded? What happens if someone puts several heavy weights in the balance pan on the side of evil?

➢ The scales will still work, but they are seriously biased toward making an evil decision.

➢ St. Augustine argues that this is exactly what has happened to humanity through sin.

➢ The human free will is biased toward evil.

➢ It really exists, and really can make decisions — just as the loaded scales still work.

➢ But instead of giving a balanced judgment, a serious bias exists toward evil.

➢ Using this and related analogies St. Augustine argues that the human free will really exists in sinners, but that it is compromised by sin.

For Pelagius

➤ Humanity possessed total freedom of the will, and was totally responsible for its own sins.

➤ Human nature was essentially free and well created, and was not compromised or incapacitated by some mysterious weakness.

➤ According to Pelagius, any imperfection in man would reflect negatively upon the goodness of God.

➤ For God to intervene in any direct way to influence human decisions was equivalent to compromising human integrity.

The Pelagians

➤ The Pelagians argued that the human free will was like a pair of balanced pans in perfect equilibrium, and not subject to any bias whatsoever.

➤ There was no need for divine grace in the sense understood by St. Augustine.

➤ God has made humanity, and knows precisely what it is capable of doing.

➤ Hence all the commands given to us are capable of being obeyed, and are meant to be obeyed.

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More of the Pelagians

➢ It is no excuse to argue that human frailty prevents these commands from being fulfilled.

➢ God has made human nature, and only demands of it what it can endure.

➢ Pelagius thus makes the uncompromising assertion that "since perfection is possible for humanity, it is obligatory."

➢ The moral rigor of this position, and its unrealistic view of human nature, served only to strengthen St. Augustine's hand as he developed the rival understanding of a tender and kindly God attempting to heal and restore wounded human nature.

The Nature of Sin

- **For St. Augustine:**
- Humanity is universally affected by sin as a consequence of the fall.
- The human mind has become darkened and weakened by sin.
- Sin makes it impossible for the sinner to think clearly, and especially to understand higher spiritual truths and ideas.
- Similarly, as we have seen, the human will has been weakened (but not eliminated) by sin.
- For Augustine, the simple fact that we are sinners means that we are in the position of being seriously ill, and unable to diagnose our own illness adequately, let alone cure it.
- It is through the grace of god alone that our illness is diagnosed (sin), and a cure made available (grace).
- The essential point that Augustine makes is that we have no control over our sinfulness.
- It is something that contaminates our lives from birth, and dominates our lives thereafter.
- It is a state over which we have no decisive control.
- We could say that Augustine understands humanity to be born with a sinful disposition as part of human nature, with an inherent bias toward acts of sinning.
- In other words, sin causes sins: The state of sinfulness causes individual acts of sin.

For Pelagius

➢ Sin is to be understood in a very different light.

➢ The idea of human disposition toward sin has no place in Pelagius' thought.

➢ For Pelagius, the human power of self-improvement could not be thought of as being compromised.

➢ It was always possible for humans to discharge their obligations toward God and their neighbors.

➢ Failure to do so could not be excused on any grounds.

➢ Sin was to be understood as an act committed willfully against God.

Pelagianism

- Pelagianism thus seems to be a rigid form of moral authoritarianism — an insistence that humanity is under obligation to be sinless, and an absolute rejection of any excuse for failure.

- Humanity is born sinless, and sins only through deliberate actions.

- Pelagius insisted that many Old Testament figures actually remained sinless.

- Only those who were morally upright could be allowed to enter the church — whereas Augustine, with his concept of fallen human nature, was happy to regard the church as a hospital where fallen humanity could recover and grow gradually in holiness through grace.

The Nature of Grace

- **For St. Augustine:**
- We are totally dependent upon God for our salvation, from the beginning to the end of our lives.
- A favorite biblical text is *"Apart from me you can do nothing"* (John 15:5).
- Augustine draws a careful distinction between the natural human faculties — given to humanity as its natural endowment — and additional special gifts of grace.
- God does not leave us where we are naturally, incapacitated by sin and unable to redeem ourselves, but gives us grace in order that we may be healed, forgiven, and restored.
- St. Augustine's view of human nature is that it is frail, weak, and lost, and needs divine assistance and care if it is to be restored and renewed.
- Grace, according to Augustine, is God's generous and quite unmerited attention to humanity, by which this process of healing may begin.
- Human nature requires transformation through the grace of God, so generously given.

For Pelagius:
On the Nature of Grace

➤ The term 'grace' is used in a very different way.

➤ First, grace is to be understood as the natural human faculties.

➤ For Pelagius, these are not corrupted or incapacitated or compromised in any way.

➤ God has given them to humanity, and they are meant to be used.

➤ When Pelagius asserted that humanity could, through grace, choose to be sinless, what he meant was that the natural human faculties of will and reason should enable humanity to choose to avoid sin.

➤ As St. Augustine was quick to point out, this is not what the New Testament understands by the term.₁₄

For Pelagius (Part 2)

➤ Second, Pelagius understood grace to be external enlightenment provided for humanity by God.

➤ Pelagius gave several examples of such enlightenment — for example, the Ten Commandments, and the moral example of our Lord Jesus Christ.

➤ Grace informs us what our moral duties are; it does not, however, assist us to perform them.

➤ We are enabled to avoid sin through the teaching and example of our Lord Jesus Christ.

➤ St. Augustine argued that this was "to locate the grace of God in the law and in teaching".

➤ The New Testament, according to St. Augustine, envisaged grace as divine assistance to humanity, rather than just moral guidance.

➤ For Pelagius, grace was something external and passive, something outside us.

➤ St. Augustine understood grace as the real and redeeming presence of God in our Lord Jesus Christ within us, transforming us; something that was internal and active.

For Pelagius (Part 3)

➢ God created humanity, and provided information concerning what is right and what is wrong — and then ceased to take any interest in humanity, apart from the final Day of Judgment.

➢ On that day, individuals will be judged according to whether they have fulfilled all their moral obligation in their totality.

➢ Failure to have done so will lead to eternal punishment.

➢ Pelagius' exhortations to moral perfection are characterized by their emphasis upon the dreadful fate of those who fail in this matter.

For St. Augustine

➤ Humanity was created good by God, and then fell away from Him — and God, in an act of grace, came to rescue fallen humanity from its predicament.

➤ He assists us by healing us, enlightening us, strengthening us, and continually working within us in order to restore us.

For Pelagius

➤ Humanity needed to be shown what to do, and could then be left to achieve it unaided.

For St. Augustine

➢Humanity needs to be shown what to do, and then gently aided at every point, if this objective was even to be approached, let alone fulfilled.

The Basis of Salvation

➢ **For St. Augustine:**

➢ Humanity is justified as an act of grace: Even human good works are the result of God working within fallen human nature.

➢ Everything leading up to salvation is the free and unmerited gift of God, given out of love for sinners.

➢ Through the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, God is enabled to deal with fallen humanity in this remarkable and generous manner, giving us that which we do not deserve (salvation), and withholding from us that which we do deserve (condemnation).

For Pelagius:
On the Basis of Salvation

➢ Humanity is justified on the basis of its merits: Human good works are the result of the exercise of the totally autonomous human free will, in fulfillment of an obligation laid down by God.

➢ A failure to meet this obligation opens the individual to the threat of eternal punishment.

➢ Our Lord Jesus Christ is involved in salvation only to the extent that he reveals, by His actions and teaching, exactly what God requires of the individual.

➢ If Pelagius can speak of 'salvation in our Lord Jesus Christ', it is only in the sense of 'salvation through imitating the example of our Lord Jesus Christ'.

Conclusion

➢ It will thus be clear that Pelagianism and Augustinianism represent two radically different outlooks, with sharply divergent understandings of the manner in which God and humanity relate to one another.

➢ **The Council of Carthage (418) decided for St. Augustine's views on grace and sin, and condemned Pelagianism in uncompromising terms.**

➢ **Comment:** St. Augustine's anti-Pelagian views about grace were used as a springboard for many heresies and therefore should be understood in contrast to the views of his opponent Pelagius in order not to be taken out of context.

Any Questions?