

Lecture 16—"God Himself is Our Power:" St. Augustine and the Pelagian Controversy

Neither weigh we the writings of all men, be they never so worthy and Catholic, as we weigh the canonical Scriptures; but that, saving the reverence that is due unto them, we may mislike and refuse somewhat in their writings, if we find that they have thought otherwise than the truth may bear. Such am I in the writings of others, and such would I wish others to be in mine.

Augustine

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.

Ephesians 2:8-9

Assigned Reading

The Story of Christianity—chapter 24, pp. 212-216

Key Terms

Grace, Pelagius, Pelagian controversy

Objectives

- Differentiate between a Pelagian and Augustinian view of grace
- Discuss the Pelagian controversy and Augustine's role in it

Class Prayer

"O God, you are the light of the minds that know you, the life of the souls that love you, and the strength of the wills that serve you; help us so to know you that we may truly love you, so to love you that we may fully serve you, whom to serve is perfect freedom; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

Augustine

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"There are at bottom but two types of religious thought in the world... There is the religion of faith; there is the 'religion' of works... All other forms of 'religious' teaching which have been known in Christendom are but unstable attempts at compromise between the two. At the opening of the fifth century, the two fundamental types came into direct conflict in remarkably pure form as embodied in the two persons of Augustine and Pelagius. Both were expending themselves in seeking to better the lives of men. But Pelagius in his exhortations threw men back on themselves; they were able, he declared, to do all that God demanded of them—otherwise God would not have demanded it. Augustine on the contrary pointed them in their weakness to God; 'He Himself,' he said... 'He Himself is our power.' The one is the 'religion' of works; the other is the religion of faith"

B. B. Warfield, "What is Calvinism?" from *Selected Shorter Works of B. B. Warfield 1*, pp 390-91

I. Grace Before Augustine

"We get some appreciation of the Pauline doctrine of grace in the charming second-century essay called the Epistle to Diognetus, and again in Tertullian; but not until we come to Augustine do we find an adequate and sympathetic comprehension of what it really is." F. F. Bruce, *The Spreading Flame*, pp. 334-35

II. Grace and Augustine**A. Augustine's experience**

1. Augustine: "Thou didst call and cry to me to break open my deafness: and Thou didst

send forth Thy beams and shine upon me and chase away my blindness: Thou didst breathe fragrance upon me, and I drew in my breath and do now pant for Thee: I tasted Thee and now hunger and thirst for Thee: Thou didst touch me, and I have burned for Thy peace.”

2. Augustine: “Give me the grace to do as you command, and command me to do what you will.” *Confessions* 10, 29 and 40

B. His study of the Scriptures

C. His clash with Pelagius

1. Pelagius’ teaching

- a. We are born “_____.”
- b. There is the “possibility” within us to do good or bad.
- c. Therefore, goodness and even perfection is attainable by us.

Pelagius: “We have implanted in us by God a possibility for acting in both directions. It resembles, as I may say, a root which is most abundant in its produce of fruit. It yields and produces diversely according to man’s will; and is capable, at the cultivator’s own choice, of either shedding a beautiful bloom of virtues, or of bristling with the thorny thicket of vices...But that we really do a good thing, or speak a good word, or think a good thought, proceeds from our own selves...Nothing good, and nothing evil, on account of which we are deemed either laudable or blameworthy, is born with us, but is done by us: for we are born not fully developed, but with a capacity for either conduct.”

Defense of the Freedom of the Will

2. Augustine’s teaching

- a. Adam was created perfect but by sinning lost the freedom of his will.
- b. As the children of Adam we are born _____.
- c. And so we are unwilling and unable to do good.
- d. Therefore, God’s grace is _____.
- e. God gives his grace freely to some.
- f. There is growth in grace but perfection only in heaven.

In Augustine’s theology, “man...was not in a situation—not even in a difficult situation. He was, himself, the situation...and only the grace of God could alter the situation.” Charles Williams, *The Descent of the Dove*, p. 66

III. Grace After Augustine

- A. Synod of Carthage (418) and Synod of Ephesus (431)
- B. The revolt of the monasteries
- C. Synod of Orange
- D. Semi-Pelagianism

“Christendom never quite committed itself to Augustine; it has spent centuries escaping from the phrases of Augustine. But without Augustine it might have ceased to be Christendom.”

Charles Williams, *The Descent of the Dove*, p. 70

E. The Reformation

F. Modern Christianity

A modern Pelagian: “If you have behaved badly, repent, make what amends you can and address yourself to the task of behaving better next time. On no account brood over your wrongdoing. Rolling in the muck is not the best way of getting clean.” Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*

Questions for Consideration

How could people become Christians without the doctrine of grace?

For Further Study

Warfield, B. B. “Augustine and the Pelagian Controversy,” *Studies in Tertullian and Augustine*.

You cannot do better than read Warfield on this topic (or on almost any other historical-theological topic).

Machen, J. Gresham. “What is Original Sin” & “Sinners Saved by Grace,” *The Christian View of Man*.

Comparison of the views of Pelagius and Augustine in popular radio talks by another Princetonian.

Read the excerpts from Augustine’s Sermon “On I John 4: 2.” Why, according to Augustine, does the Arian not really believe that Jesus Christ “came in the flesh”? What does it mean that Christ “emptied himself.”? What do the various heresies hold in common? Explain your answers.