

Pelagius: The Scapegoat of the Western Church from Augustine to Today

Introduction

During the time of Pelagius there was a subtle conflict between the Imperial Church of the west and the monastic tradition that was budding as a response to its materialism and hierarchy. That monastic tradition was rooted in discipline and the lessons of the ascetic desert “fathers” and was in conflict with the lavishness of the church at the time. The voices that we hear most often from this time are big names like St. Augustine de Hippo, Jerome, and others that present an opposite position to Pelagius as well as to the benefit of discipline afforded in the monastic traditions. These traditions on either side evolved into doctrines and theologies that we still today either embrace or refute.

Doctrinal Background

Still, though, much of our knowledge of Pelagius comes from the condemnation of his work. There are varied volumes of research arguing for a mere four letters¹ supposedly written by Pelagius but still we only know what we know from interpretive condemning works. The first voice of disagreement to Pelagius’ position, naming Pelagius, comes from Augustine in the year 415.² From that moment on, it only gets worse for Pelagius and his younger friend Caelestius. For Augustine, the teachings of Pelagius did not resonate with his own life experiences. Augustine felt that there was something in his life that had kept him away from a perfect and sinless life as he confessed in *The Confessions*. Because of this, Augustine comes up with the doctrine

¹ Robert F. Evans, *Four Letters of Pelagius*, (New York: The Seabury Press, 1968).

² B.R. Rees, *The Letters of Pelagius and his followers*, (Rochester, NY: The Boydell Press, 1991), 3.

of Original Sin. That is to say, the fall of Adam has been transferred through sex to all of humanity and that fall separates humanity completely from being able to do the good will of God. Everyone including new born children are sinners. In Augustine's doctrine, humanity has no options, no free will to do good. The only thing humanity is able to do is commit sins. In other words, the deeds of individuals are unable to produce good works. It is only by the grace of God that goodness enters into the world through humanity and not of anything in humanity itself. This was the main disconnect from Pelagius was trying to emphasize; only by the grace of God can humanity be saved from sin. As Augustine develops his doctrine of Grace, he begins to come to the conclusion that the grace of God is irresistible. That is to say, once grace has been bestowed upon an individual there is no denying the salvation and the transition of self from sin to salvation. With the further development of this doctrine in Augustine's mind, because salvation is irresistible, and God is omnipotent, God has pre-chosen those whom God will bestow God's grace. Thus for Augustine we see a development of the doctrine of predestination.

The interesting point here is that Pelagius is not exactly the antithesis to Augustine's claims.³ Pelagius believed in the fall of Adam but did not believe that the first sin of Adam was transferred to humanity. Pelagius' view seems to be a stepping back to original Jewish interpretations of the story of the garden of Eden where humanity was able to be righteous despite being cast out of the garden. Examples in scripture point to Noah as well as Abraham being "righteous." We also see, from charges against him, that Pelagius believed that infants were in the same state as Adam

³ Robert F. Evans, *Pelagius: Inquiries and Reappraisals*, (New York: The Seabury Press, 1968), 2.

was before the fall.⁴ Pelagius also challenged Augustine asking, “If baptism effaces original sin, can the child of baptized parents be born in sin?”⁵ The doctrine of Pelagius was more about validating the experience of many monastics at the time. The monastic tradition was built on the concept of disciple leading to a closer relationship with God. Pelagius saw the Imperial church of the day as falling far short the necessary effort required to being in relationship with God as well as being lead by the Holy Spirit. Pelagius was attempting to make the claim that an individual could achieve a closer grace-filled relationship with God through one’s own free will separate from the church, the clergy, and all of its Traditions. This was a major obstacle for the Imperial church, as it would leave nothing for the institution of the church to do, as the church was setup at this time. The striking point to be made here is that Pelagius’ doctrine seems to be a revival of the early Christian movements that emphasized following Jesus as example of life lived as a means of grace but was dropped when an institutional and political form of the church began to take shape. So, for Pelagius a true Christian was one, whom after baptism, attempted to live “‘without spot and wrinkle’; they study divine law as set out in scriptures and obey the commandments of Jesus in every particular, whether great or small; they are holy, innocent, undefiled, unstained, with no malice but only godliness and goodness in their hearts; they do not know how to harm or hurt anyone but only help everyone...they do not seek the praises of others or their possessions but rather the kingdom of heaven, which is their sole reward.”⁶

⁴ B.R. Rees, *Ibid.*, 10.

⁵ John Ferguson, *Pelagius: A Historical and Theological Study*, (Cambridge: W. Heffer & Sons Ltd., 1956), 55.

⁶ B.R. Rees, *Ibid.*, 8.

Making the Move Against Pelagius

Augustine found Pelagius' doctrine disharmonious with all he had built up within the church and made his disagreement known to many, especially those in Rome. Augustine with the help of over 50 other bishops in the synod at Diospolis sent a letter to Pope Innocent to inform the Holy See of "the blasphemy" being preached by Pelagius and his followers. Innocent deliberated on the matter and at times was confused by the whole matter, as he had heard none of the alleged blasphemy himself before he received the letter from the bishops. In a reply to Augustine, Innocent praises the bishop for recognizing the authority of the Holy See in Rome to a great length⁷ and further condemns Pelagius and Caelestius to excommunication with the ability to rejoin the church when they return to orthodoxy.⁸ Augustine reveled in his victory over Pelagius but did all he could to suppress Pelagius' supporters. We have a letter from Augustine at this time directed to Paulinus of Nola criticizing the Nola people and re-emphasizing his own doctrine of grace and predestination. "Because of the sin of Adam the human race, who sin in Adam, are under a just condemnation. Out of the mass of souls condemned God selects, arbitrarily and absolutely, a certain number for salvation. The infant who dies unbaptized is damned : it is a hard saying, but to say less is to denigrate the grace of God in mercy towards those whom He chooses to save."⁹ In the end, Augustine concludes that the doctrine of Pelagius is a secular and godless philosophy. Unfortunately for Augustine, his victory was slightly premature. Innocent died only forty-four days after his decree and because the excommunication was

⁷ John Ferguson, *Ibid.*, 94-95.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, 100.

conditional, the next Pope, Zosimus, re-opened the issue. Zosimus, after hearing the case from Caelestius and letters from Pelagius, which professed the need for God's grace, declared Pelagius' doctrine to be fully orthodox and catholic. Zosimus named the followers as *absolutae fidei* (of unblemished faith) and restored Pelagius and Caelestius to communion with the church.¹⁰ The communion did not last long.

Augustine put pressure on Zosimus to reconsider his decisions, which would be almost as big a scandal as Zosimus overturning the decree of Innocent. The pressure went so far as to include the Emperor who pressured Zosimus to change his acquittal of Pelagius. With the pressures of the Empire on his back as well as the Council of Carthage passing canons against the teachings of Pelagius, Zosimus caved in to the pressure and reversed his decision and condemned Pelagius, Caelestius and their followers excommunicating them again ordering all bishops who found favor with them to condemn them as well. All those bishops refusing to subscribe to this *Epistula Tractoria* document were removed from their sees and expelled from the Church.¹¹

The Controversy Continues

The final excommunication of Pelagius and his bishop supporters did not end the Pelagian controversy. Augustine spent much of his aging years defending his position against Pelagius and reassuring many bishops of the heresy of the Pelagius doctrines. In all this back and forth of doctrine there were those that did not fall on either side of the debate but rather came up with what is know as the Semi-Pelagian doctrine. A major advocate of the Semi-Pelagian doctrine was Faustus bishop of Riez a former monk of Lérins. With his monastic background, Faustus believed in the ability

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 106.

¹¹ B.R. Rees, *Ibid.*, 4-5.

of human will to afford grace but not to the degree described by Pelagius himself. In his work *De gratia* which was concerned with the Semi-Pelagian doctrine, Faustus “stated his purpose was to chart a middle course between the Pelagian error of asserting human work as adequate in itself for the achievement of salvation and the predestinarian error of asserting divine grace as the single effective element in the salvific process.”¹² This Semi-Pelagianism proceeds into the pages of history affecting mostly the Celtic Christian church as well as Arminianism which would go on to influence John Wesley and the Methodist church.¹³

Scapegoat?

As can be seen, Pelagius has been vilified greatly in the beginnings of his doctrines and the maligning did not end after his excommunication. It has been the role of Pelagius to play the villain for theologians and Christian historians alike. A counter example to the pristine saintly image of Augustine the church has embraced. Researchers have gone so far as to pile onto Pelagius the authors’ one conclusions about the Pelagian doctrine as the words of Pelagius.¹⁴ In his book *Pelagius: Inquiries and Reappraisals*, Robert Evans notes that for Pelagius there are three types of vilification or assertions:

- (1) factual assertions, i.e., that Pelagius did or did not hold certain precise views, such as that all [humanity] created now are in the same state as Adam before the fall;
- (2) evaluative assertions, such as that Pelagian theology is fundamentally

¹² Rebecca Harden Weaver, *Divine Grace and Human Agency: A Study of the Semi-Pelagian Controversy*, (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1996), 165.

¹³ Lewis Loflin, *Pelagius*, “Pelagius (c.a. 354-418)”, (Homepage of Lewis Loflin, 2004, accessed 2 December 2004), http://www.sullivan-country.com/id2/pelagius_brit.htm; Internet.

¹⁴ Robert F. Evans, *Pelagius: Inquiries and Reappraisals*, *Ibid.*, 65-66.

Godless; (3) assertions which in some proportion are a combination of types 1 and 2, such as that Pelagius has no real theology of redemption.¹⁵

Recent scholarship has curbed the vilification of Pelagius as the place to lay all sins of “godless heresy” but the underlying understandings of Pelagius come to us through the lenses of these previous scholars in history and this we ourselves are forming our opinion on their account of history.

On Sin and Grace

Primarily it must be considered how do we know what we know and how can we be confident in it. The extreme postmodernist perspective would say that nothing can be know, not even your very own existence. Many Christians would obviously see the concept of ‘knowing’ differently. To understand where this concept stems from we have to go all the way back to creation. That is to say, the present moment, which if one thinks about "the present moment" one realizes that it is already past and lost to history. The creating of creation is present throughout. God not only created in the distant unseen past but also is continually creating. Sustaining creation in existence, through creation, within creation, and outside creation. God envelops all that is and keeps it because it is God's.¹⁶ Now, we can see that because God has created something, in God's omnipotence, it must therefore have purpose that is pleasing to God. That is to say, in the Christian perspective, Human beings have a purpose in creation and that purpose is all good.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹⁶ John Randall Sachs, *The Christian Vision of Humanity: Basic Christian Anthropology (Zacchaeus Studies Theology)*, (New York: Liturgical Press, 1991), 5-25.

So, what is the aforementioned purpose of Human beings? Well, a more important idea must be understood first before we can truly understand the purpose of God's created creatures. The idea of "Human" needs to be defined before the purpose of that creature can be described. When we speak of humans most of us are really talking about persons. The created creature of a human being is much more than just flesh and bone. It is a physical body inter-created with a spiritual essence that is the soul, which is continually sustained in existence by God. From this we see that being created in such a manner brings about "The Person" that is human. This "Person" has been created with dignity, love, compassion, and grace.¹⁷ These attributes of the creation are passed on to the creation. This dignity, love, compassion, and grace are inherently required to be given to a human person by other human persons. Since God is continually sustaining the Person, within the Person, and then it follows that, the Person shows her created attributes to all that is God's. That is all of creation.

Along with dignity, love, compassion, and grace, God has given the Person something special showing how much God truly loves God's creation. God has been given the Human Person free will. God has given God's creation the ability to choose. Without this choice, it is hard to imagine how we as humans could truly ever express our love back to God, if in fact we were forced by design to love God. That is to say, love without choice is not really love at all by definition. But the omniscient God of creation knew this and bestowed upon us "choice."

Now, that we know that a human being is much more than just a being but a creature that is defined as a "Person" given inherent rights as a person by God, we can

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 43-58.

finally define what a person's purpose is. Simply stated by Jesus, this purpose is to love and serve the Lord and to love your neighbor as yourself. We have already talked about loving one's neighbor as one's self, in that, we are all persons created with dignity and love which we can't help but show to others because of our dependant relationship with God.

So, we see that in the Christian view, God is the final arbiter or measure of all things. The human person, being created by God, receives her concepts of value, ethic, and laws from God. So, humanities values and laws should be perfect, being received fully from God. Well, as we can see from such events as the Holocaust, America's destruction of the Indian people of North America and currently in Iraq, infanticide in China, and so on and so on, something has gone terribly wrong with our complete and total connection with God. Something has separated us, is separating us, will separate us from the Will of God?

And this is the crux of the Augustine/Pelagian debate. Where does one proceed from here? Does one take the path of Augustine and impose predestination for a doctrine of original sin or does one the path of Pelagius and follow a doctrine of cultural sin where "salvation" may or may not be necessary depending on whom one talks to concerning that sin. I have strayed slightly from my central thesis but it is necessary to take this path to understand just how fundamental the Pelagian debate really is to our understanding of God and God's relation to all of creation.

Conclusion

Pelagius a British monk trying to make his way in the world of empire and oppression called attention to himself at exactly the right moment to be squashed by the Imperial church only later to be vilified as godless. But if we really want to understand what Pelagius was trying to do, we need to understand what he trying to say about a core point of contention: That of predestination. Pelagius was lifting up the notion that “predestination” was really only God’s foreknowledge of those who would use their free will to lift up in faith the acceptance of the grace given to all to enact in the world the Will of God. Pelagius desires neither to remove our created nature or our free will. “God’s foreknowing predestination in Pelagius appears to mean two things: (1) God’s will to make [God’s] grace available to those who [God] knows will come to [God] in faith; (2) God’s will that future rewards be commensurate with moral achievement in this life.”¹⁸

Pelagius has faced the fiercest fires against his doctrine but it still continues on in history. John Wesley called Pelagius as big of a heretic as Augustine if the basis for the heresy is to bring to the fore one particular truth at the cost of others.¹⁹ Because of these fires many good doctrines have been lost as being too “Pelagian”²⁰ in their practice. The doctrines of depravity in sin clearly defined by Augustine are with us today in much of our theology and church practice. Be it the doctrine of Atonement through suffering or the helplessness of humanity to this present darkness of creation, we would do well to look back as what has so often been dismissed as heretical.

¹⁸ Robert F. Evans, *Pelagius: Inquiries and Reappraisals, Ibid.*, 117.

¹⁹ John Ferguson, *Ibid.*, 182.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 183.

The real issue for all of these squabbling is that of original sin. The body of scripture is not even clear about this doctrine even arguing with itself at times about the entire notion. “On three points Pelagius remains to be answered, first, the definition of sin and the nature of our moral responsibility, second, the nature of its physical transmission, third, the reconciliation of a belief in universal sin with the full humanity and yet perfect sinlessness of Jesus.”²¹

This is not to say Pelagius had all the answers to our doctrinal woes. Pelagius had his own faults be it trying to mechanize prayer or his inability to have a clear doctrine of Atonement are just some of the faults of Pelagius. But these are not even close to being heretical. Pelagius still calls to us to answer his questions and follow the path of Creation to the fullness God has *predestined* for it.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 184.

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