AUGUSTINE VS PELAGIUS

Prayer
Scriptures: Romans 5:12-21; I Cor. 15:21,22; Ephesians 2:1-10
Hymn: 337 "Amazing Grace"

The greatest of the battles waged by Augustine as a bishop was his battle with Pelagius. It became a world-wide battle involving the whole Christian world and has continued to trouble the church until today. Sometimes it is called "The Sin-Grace Controversy" and sometimes "The Anthropological Controversy" (the controversy over the nature of man). Pelagius and his followers were condemned as heretics and have been considered such by most of the Christian world ever since. After the condemnation of Pelagius the church wavered between Semi-Pelagianism and Semi-Augustinianism for nearly two centuries until the Council of Orange in 529 A.C. declared the truth to be a Semi-Augustinian position. The Medieval Church and Luther were Semi-Augustinian. John Calvin tried to lead the world back to full Augustinianism. Over and over in church history ardent reformers have run the risk of being accused of Pelagianism--of putting too much stress on human effort. In the Reformation the Anabaptists, Socinians and Arminians were accused of being Pelagian. The men of the Restoration Movement of the 19th century and the Church of Christ of the 20th century have been suspected of being Pelagian.

Both Augustine and Pelagius developed their systems of thought independently of each other. Before they became aware of each other their systems were already well-developed and fairly complete. Their conflict polished, deepened, and bolstered their positions.

FORERUNNERS OF AUGUSTINE:

Augustine's system was not completely new and original. The early Eastern Church had generally held to the essential goodness and free will of man. Tertullian of Carthage raised the question of the origin of the soul of man. He leaned toward what came to be known as "Traducianism"--the soul is begotten by the parents along with the body. He suggested that the soul might inherit a taint that went all the way back to Adam. This idea lingered and grew in the West. Ambrose, the teacher of Augustine, held that through the fall of Adam we all come into the world sinners. In Adam all sinned and all died. Before we were born we were all defiled by contagion. Ambrose taught the propagation of Adam's sin but not the imputation of his guilt. The grace of Christ in baptism destroys iniquity.

AUGUSTINE'S DOCTRINE THE EXPLANATION OF HIS OWN EXPERIENCE:

Augustine as the middle-aged bishop of Hippo looked back over his spiritual pilgrimage. He had been a great sinner. He found himself helpless in his efforts to quit sin. Then he had suddenly found himself free with sin no longer appealing to him. He knew others who had risen above the sinful life. He knew many others who were never able to break the hold of sin. He sought and found an explanation of the human experiences.

He had been unable to quit sin because he was totally depraved. He had been able to quit sin because God had made him the object of his saving grace. This grace had changed his sinful will. Why had this happened to him and not to some others who continued in sin? Augustine found the answer in election by God. God chose some and not others.

Augustine worked his way back to a world of God and the angels who had free will. Some of the angels sinned and fell from heaven. God created man that he might fill up the number of the fallen angels. God is characterized by limitless power and foreknowledge. He could see the end from the beginning. His elect would show his goodness and mercy. The non-elect would show his justice and righteousness. God created Adam free, capable of sinning or not sinning, and capable of mortality or of immortality. All matter was created out of nothing and tended to go back into the nothingness out
of which God had called it. The continued existence of all God's creation depended
in every moment on his providential care. God is pure being. He made everything good.
Everything that exists is good. Evil is the lack of existence--the tendency to go
back into non-existence. Grace is the creative act of God. Man was created in a state
of grace with an inclination of the will toward the good. He had the possibility of
sinning but not the necessity. Adam lost his original state because his will became
evil. He did not want to obey God because he wanted to become his own master. His
sin was pride. He did not realize his dependence on God. His pride was an expression
of the tendency to return to nothingness. Adam became a sinner. His sin resulted
in carnal concupiscence--the love of self. Sin changed Adam's nature. He became
subject to ignorance, lust and death. He became mortal, losing the possibility of
immortality. He lost the ability not to sin--there remained only the freedom to sin.
Man's nature became a mass of corruption with a necessity of sinning. Adam had done
more than a single sinful act--he had become a sinner--he had changed his nature.

The whole race was in Adam's body as a seed. By his sin the seed was vitiated.
The defect grew. The whole human race became a mass of perdition with the necessity
of sinning. The character of Adam passed to his posterity. The race had lost the ability
not to sin and the potential for immortality. Every child was born totally depraved--
a mass of corruption. This was why Augustine had been unable to quit sin. He had
inherited the original sin which is both real sin and guilt.

Augustine found the key to this inherited original sin in carnal concupiscence.
The depravity is handed down in the very act of begetting a child. In the reproductory
act there is an element of pleasure. It is in this element of pleasure that the sin
of Adam is handed down.

God elected to save by his grace enough fallen men to fill up the number of the
fallen angels. Before the foundation of the world God elected so many to be saved and
so many to be lost. It was all God's doing--the number could not be changed. The
elect would show the goodness and mercy of God--they deserved to be damned but God
elected to save them to show his goodness. The damned were getting what they deserved.

God sent Christ to die for his elect. Christ did not die for the non-elect.
It is irresistible. Grace begins the good in man. It is divine creative power in
action. The first blessing of grace is the forgiveness of sins through baptism.
Augustine could not quit sin until God sent his grace. God sent his grace because he
was one of the elect. The non-elect were still in sin. They could not leave sin because
God did not send them grace and God did not send grace because Christ did not die for
them because they were not of the elect.

Baptism takes away the sinful nature of Adam. Christian marriage is good because
it is God's plan. The begetting of children is good. It is not sinful but the element
of concupiscence remains so that the taint of Adam is passed to the child. Every
child is born under the curse and is totally depraved.

The grace of God creates faith in the elect. Grace in baptism changes man's
nature. The ungodly man becomes righteous and the dead man becomes a living man.
Grace makes a man's will good and capable of doing good. Ignorance is overcome by
faith. Love of self is replaced by love of God. The perfecting of the new man is
the work of a lifetime. Grace will finish what it has begun. There is grace in the
Lord's Supper and in penance. Grace gives the gift of perseverance. Everything is
in the hands of God. None of his elect can be lost. It is all the work of God.

THE SYSTEM OF PELAGIUS:

Pelagius was a serious, baptized layman of good education who came from
Britain to Rome about the time Augustine returned to Africa. His teachers had
been monks noted for great austerities, self-control and great holiness. Christians
were a minority and had to struggle hard to survive and grow in a pagan society.
It was the fresh Christianity of the mission field, accustomed to great effort.
This British Christianity had much in common with Eastern Christianity. It
believed man was created good and that he had free will. Man needed to be
exhorted to give his best. Pelagius' religious development had been equable
and peaceful, and not marked by prolonged mental conflict or abrupt transitions.
It had been a matter of gradual growth.
Pelagius was shocked at the lax, easy-going ways of Roman Christianity. He took an active part in the religious discussions going on daily in Rome. He exchanged ideas with monks and priests from the East, from Africa, from Italy. The first principle of Pelagius was the freedom of the will. At each moment of life, regardless of the previous career, the will was free and able to choose the good or the evil. Man was born without any bias to either evil or good. Man was not injured by the fall of Adam except in so far as the bad example of predecessors misleads. Pelagius denied the existence of original sin. Sin was an act of the will and not a nature to be inherited. The unassisted human will could accept or reject God's offer of salvation. In salvation the human will took the initiative. Man can desire and seek salvation. Man can believe the evidence God offers in revelation. Pelagius believed an entirely sinless life was possible. His favorite maxim was: "If I ought, I can," God would not command the impossible. Pelagius declared, "Whenever I have to speak of laying down rules for behaviour and the conduct of a holy life, I always point out, first of all, the power and functioning of human nature, and show what it is capable of doing, lest I should seem to be wasting my time, by calling on people to embark on a course which they consider impossible to achieve."

As Pelagius became aware of the teachings of Augustine that were spreading he came to feel that the low moral tone of Rome was largely due to the ideas of total depravity and predestination. Men were putting too much emphasis on God's activity rather than facing up to their own responsibilities. He objected strongly to the passage in Augustine's Confessions, "Command what You will: give what You command." He believed this made God guilty of personal acts of favoritism and blurred the incorruptible majesty of God as lawgiver. Pelagius set forth his ideas in an outspoken pamphlet, On Nature (405 A.D.). In much greater detail Pelagius set forth his ideas in 409 in his Exposition of the Epistles of Paul—a work that enjoyed wide circulation and whose style and power Augustine had to recognize. Pelagius carried on an extensive correspondence and attracted a wide-spread following. One of his most noted patrons was Paulinus of Nola. He won many young men of good education—some of them with legal training became skilled debaters. The most noted of his young followers was Caelestius from a noble family.

THE FLIGHT OF THE PELAGIANS TO NORTH AFRICA:

When the Goths sacked Rome in 410 Pelagius, Caelestius and other Pelagians were among those who fled to North Africa. Pelagius sent a note to Augustine and received from him a brief reply. Augustine was away when Pelagius visited Hippo. He may have met Augustine briefly twice but on occasions when there was no time for discussion. Augustine knew Pelagius only from reports and from his writings. Pelagius stayed in Africa about a year and moved on to Palestine. The spread of Pelagian ideas deeply troubled Augustine.

In Carthage Caelestius very actively spread the Pelagian ideas. He engaged in debates. When he put himself up as a candidate for the priesthood it provoked a crisis. Caelestius was much more aggressive and radical than Pelagius. He pushed the arguments to logical extremes that Pelagius would not acknowledge. Caelestius declared that man could live without sin without grace. The will was not free if many had to have grace. He denied that infant baptism was to take away sins. It was to dedicate the child to God.

Aurelius, bishop of Carthage, received warnings against Pelagius and Caelestius from Italy, Gaul, and from Augustine. He summoned a synod when Caelestius applied for ordination. Paulinus, a deacon from Milan, charged Caelestius with six errors. Sometimes a seventh is added:

1. That Adam was mortal and would have died even if he had not sinned.
2. That the sin of Adam injured himself alone, not the human race.
3. That newborn children are in the same condition in which Adam was before the fall.
4. That the whole human race does not die because of Adam's death or sin, nor will the whole race rise again because of the
resurrection of Christ.

5. That the Law gives entrance to heaven as well as the Gospel.

6. That even before the coming of Christ there were men who were entirely without sin.

7. That infants, though unbaptized, have eternal life.

The synod condemned and excommunicated Caelestius. He fled to the East where he was ordained at Ephesus.

PALEGIANISM IN PALESTINE:

Augustine sent Orosius to Palestine to warn Jerome and the bishops. Augustine did not make sense to the Easterners. Their tradition favored the essential goodness and free will of man. Jerome pressured Bishop John of Jerusalem to call a synod in 415. Pelagius was able to convince Bishop John and the Jerusalem Synod of the orthodoxy of his ideas.

Jerome was dissatisfied with the synod. A second synod met in Diospolis (Lydda) in December 415 with fourteen bishops in attendance. Jerome accused Pelagius of denying grace and saying that man could live without sin if only he desired it. Pelagius denied the extreme positions ascribed to him. He asserted that he believed in the necessity of grace. Pelagius insisted that many of the ideas for which he was criticized were matters open for discussion since they were questions on which no council had ruled. He disowned irresponsible postions taken by some of his disciples, claiming to hold to the traditional positions of the church.

Augustinians felt Pelagius was cowardly and accused him of using ambiguous language to hide his positions. The synod again cleared Pelagius.

POINTS AT ISSUE:

1. Free Will: Augustine did not deny free will. He insisted that man was free only to choose the evil. Pelagius insisted free will meant freedom to choose the evil or the good.

2. Predestination and Election: Augustine insisted God had fixed the number of those to be saved. Pelagius insisted the number was not fixed and that God wanted all to be saved and that Christ died for all.

3. The Effects of Adam's sin: Augustine insisted Adam's sin brought death and caused all to be born totally depraved. Pelagius taught that man was created mortal and would have died without Adam's sin. The death brought by Adam's sin was spiritual. Pelagius insisted all babies are born as innocent as Adam was when God placed him in the Garden. Augustine argued that the fact that infants die proves that infants are born depraved sinners. Pelagius angered Augustine by speaking of Adam's little childish sin.

4. Infant Baptism: Augustine taught that infant baptism took away the son of Adam. He accused Pelagius of being inconsistent and cowardly for continuing infant baptism when he denied that it was to remove the sin of Adam.

5. Penance: Pelagius urged that penance as practised in the church encouraged people to sin. Augustine accused Pelagius of undermining penance and thereby undermining the role of the bishops and the church.

6. Sin: Augustine felt that Pelagius had an inadequate, shallow, naive conception of sin. He looked at sin only in the abstract and not in the context of human history. Pelagius insisted that sin was a single act of misuse of the will. He denied that it was a nature that could be inherited.

A usurper, Basilicus, drove the new emperor, Zeno, from Constantinople, and took over the empire as the champion of the Monophysites. In 476 he issued his Encyclion denouncing Chalcedon as heresy. The whole empire was engaged in a fierce battle. Bishops were stabbed in the baptistry and at the Lord’s Table. In Antioch the two forces fought bloody battles with no truce to bury the dead—they fed the bodies of their enemies to the dogs and buzzards.

Daniel, a pole sitting monk, came down from his pole near the Black Sea and went up and down the streets of Constantinople stark naked, calling on the people to drive the heretic from the throne. The people rioted and drove out Basilicus and brought back Zeno.

Zeno published his Henoticon in 482 taking a stand on holy Nicaea and denouncing all heresies against it. He approved the Twelve Chapters of Cyril. He did not say Chalcedon had erred but condemned it if it had erred. He was taking a calculated risk that he could depend on the Chalcedonians. He was trying to win back the Monophysites. The Chalcedonians were furious even at the suggestion Chalcedon might have erred. Monophysites wanted a clear and strong condemnation of Chalcedon. The pope held a council and condemned Zeno for daring to try to settle the holy faith by imperial proclamation. Rome and the East split in 484. The schism would last until 517 when Pope Hormisdus and the Emperor, Justin, would work out a unity formula that tried to combine Chalcedon and Cyril.

The Monophysites were organizing separated national churches.

Nestorians went their own way, flourishing in Persia and sending missionaries to India, Japan, and China.

Nestorius prepared and published his Treatise of Heraclides of Damascus. He rejoiced at the triumph of his doctrine at Chalcedon.