

The Human Will - According to Augustine and Pelagius

(Paul Mizzi)

The British monk Pelagius and the North African bishop Augustine were contemporaries. They were both born in the fourth century A.D. Both claimed to be faithful teachers of the Bible.

In this article I will specifically highlight their respective doctrine of the will, and show how it inevitably affected their doctrines of sin and grace.

The controversy between Augustine and Pelagius about man's will in his fallen condition was re-echoed a millenium later in Erasmus' Diatribe and Luther's answer in *The Bondage of the Will*. The able Reformer, like Augustine, knew from Scripture that sinful man has a will, indeed, but his will is enslaved, and bent towards evil, and can do nothing except wickedness. For until man is converted, and his will is renewed by the Holy Spirit, his will is captive to Satan, and "are taken captive by him at his will" (2 Timothy 2:26).

Though the will is never forced, nor destined by any necessity of nature to perform evil, yet sinful man has lost all ability of will to perform any of the spiritual good which accompanies salvation. He is not able, by an act of the will, to repent and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. He is not willing to be converted. Jeremiah prayed, "Convert us, O Lord, and we shall be converted." Unless the Lord intervenes, man remains bound, for "the world loves darkness rather than light, because its deeds are evil" (Jn.3).

The natural man, according to Scripture (and Augustine), is altogether averse and opposed to spiritual good. Christ said that "You, being evil, are able to give good gifts to your children..." thus strongly emphasizing that our deeds, however bright and commendable, do not make us good in ourselves. A corrupt tree bears corrupt fruit. That's all it can do. The natural man is not able by his own strength to turn to God, or even dispose himself towards God (Titus 3:3-5; John 6:44). He is dead in sin (Ephesians 2:1-5). He is at enmity with God (Romans 5:6; 8:7).

Without a divine, gracious and radical renewal (accomplished in regeneration) man cannot fulfil any obligation to God. Grace is essential for man does not seek God. It is God who seeks him.

Over against this, Pelagius asserted the full ability and potential in the human will. He taught that man can eliminate sin from his life by an act of the will. Man can keep the commandments of God, if he wants to. He reached this conclusion by twisted logic: "God would not command man to do what cannot be done by man." Thus Pelagius, in considering the will, forgot or rather played down the consequence of Adam's fall. Man was created able, but lost his ability through his apostasy. But Pelagius asserted that no obligation can ever be placed outside man's limitless capacity for good.

How does these differing viewpoints affect the doctrines of sin and grace?

Evidently, for Augustine, if man has a perverse and wicked will, bound to sin, then we can see how sinful sin is, to what extremity sin has driven man. Man lost all knowledge of the true God,

became guilty and sinful; he serves sin; all his faculties, including the will, are orientated towards the servitude of sin. He does not want God; actually he hates God and carves for himself a god in wood and stone or in this imagination.

Thus the will, directed against God, brings the most radical consequences. He has a corrupt nature from conception; he is under the influence of a prevailing effectual tendency to sin and wickedness.

What hope is there for man in such a state, being alienated from God by his wilful ignorance, "For though they knew God they did not glorify him...but became vain in the imaginations..." In such an enslavement, Augustine sees God's grace to be the only solution, the only remedy. God comes to man when man is fleeing from him. He does not force him to act against his will, but in grace renews his will. "I will remove the heart of stone and give them a new heart, that they may obey me..." (Ezek.). God's grace does not destroy freedom, for sinful man is far from being free. God's grace changes their will so that, once renewed, man freely chooses holiness rather than sin. "If the Son sets you free you shall be free indeed."

For Pelagius, his doctrine of man's will is reflected (consistently enough) on his ideas about sin and grace. Pelagius taught that man's will, from birth, is a tabula rasa, neutral, neither sinful nor holy. It depends on man himself to use his will aright. Thus sin, for Pelagius, exists because we imitate the wrong-doing of others. Sin can be overwhelmed by the sinner; it is not serious; it does not bring death.

Naturally, then, grace is nothing more than God's help. Man, according to Pelagius, is free to reject both the Law and the example of Christ. He can resist every inducement to follow Christ. Grace is clearly resistible for, as the poet Henley put it, "I am the master of my fate, the captain of my soul." I alone determine my destiny, my future, whether it will be blessed or miserable. Man can accept or reject proffered grace at will. So, at the end of the day, man is his own Saviour, for what determines his salvation is his will. (This Pelagian venom is common in Arminian circles today).

Thus we see how one heresy easily and naturally leads to another one for support. At least Pelagius's system is consistent, consistently erroneous.

Augustine, having a viable anthropology (the constitution of man, including the nature of his will), sees grace as the Only Rescue for enslaved man.

At the Council of Ephesus (431 A.D.) and the Synod of Orange (529 A.D.) Augustine was vindicated and Pelagius condemned. The system of Pelagius was shown to be erroneous and contrary to the Scriptures, while the Augustinian doctrine of sin and grace was approved (see further my article "What Orange decided").

Faithful brethren in Christ, is Augustine's position our firm belief? Or have we drunk from Pelagius' poison? Search and see...

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