

Ancient Church History

Semi-Pelagianism, Semi-Augustinianism, and the Synod of Orange (529)

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Review of Pelagius and Augustine/ Council of Ephesus (431)

Pelagius was a British monk, a very zealous preacher who was castrated for the sake of the kingdom and given to rigorous asceticism. He desired to live a life of perfect holiness. In Christian history, he has come to be the arch-heretic of the church, but in his early writings he was very orthodox and sought to maintain and uphold the creeds of the early church.

Pelagius came from Rome to Carthage in the year 410 AD (after Alaric I had captured Rome) with his friend and student **Celestius**. He taught the people of North Africa a new emphasis on morals and the rigorous life of living the Gospel, because he was shocked by the low tone of Roman morals and thought that Augustine's teaching on divine grace contributed to the immorality. Celestius, who was the most prominent follower of Pelagius at the time, was condemned at the **Council of Carthage in 411** because he denied the transmission of Adam's sins to his descendants.

Augustine began to write and preach against Pelagius and Celestius' doctrines. Pelagius and Celestius were condemned at two councils at Carthage and Milevis (Numidia, North Africa) in 416 and Innocent I (410-17) excommunicated them from the church. On **May 1, 418 the Council of Carthage** convened to issue a series of nine canons affirming without compromise the Augustinian doctrine of the Fall and Original Sin. Emperor Honorius (395-423) issued an imperial decree denouncing the teachings of Pelagius and Celestius in that same year. Pelagius disappeared from history and is thought to have died in 420 AD. After Pelagius' disappearance and death, Celestius and **Julian of Eclanum** (ca. 386-454) debated Augustine until his death in 430, and Pelagianism was condemned again at the **Council of Ephesus in 431**. Pelagianism and the variations on this theological system have been condemned by more councils than any other false teaching.

Semi-Pelagianism

In the subsequent history after Pelagianism is officially condemned at Ephesus (431), it continues to thrive in small sects within the orthodox body of Christ. There were those within the orthodox church who believed that Pelagianism was a heresy, but they did not agree fully with Augustinian Soteriology. These **"Semi-Pelagians"** as they were called, rejected **Augustine's doctrines of predestination and irresistible grace**. They thought that these two doctrines denied human responsibility or man's freewill. The Semi-Pelagians thought that if one held to Augustine's view of free will (being in bondage to sin), then this would undermine the monastic and missionary vision of the Church. To be as charitable as possible, the problem with Semi-Pelagianism is that they can accept some aspects of God's sovereignty and his purpose over his world, but they cannot accept all aspects of God's sovereignty, especially as it pertains to man's salvation.

The story begins with a monk from the Roman province of Scythia Minor (modern Romania and Bulgaria on the Danube and Black Sea) who was concerned with the implications of Augustine's

teaching on predestination and irresistible grace. **John Cassian (d. ca. 433)** established many monasteries, and later during the time of Augustine's debate with Pelagius, he wrote a book entitled **Conferences** (ca. 428).

In this book, Cassian argued against Augustine's teaching (but he was not in agreement with Pelagius either!), and says that the Bible teaches that the beginning of good will is man's doing (*pace* Pelagius), but grace supervenes immediately thereafter (*contra* Pelagius). Cassian would become a popularizer of Semi-Pelagian teaching. Augustine responded to Cassian's teachings in two formidable works: **On the Predestination of the Saints** and **The Gift of Perseverance**.

Cassian in his books and conferences thought that if one believed in Augustine's teaching on predestination it would "cripple the force of preaching, reproof, and moral energy...and plunge men into despair..." He thought: If man's free will is not the initiative toward grace, then how (and why!?) would one seek to encourage men to choose to join monasteries and preach the gospel? Cassian taught concerning grace that "though God's grace is necessary for salvation and assists the human will in doing good, it is man, not God, who must will that which is good. Grace is given *in order that he who has begun to will may be assisted*, not to give the power to will" (*contra* Augustine).

Historian and theologian **Adolph Harnack** summarized Cassian's view in his **History of Dogma**, Pt. 2: "God's grace is the foundation of our salvation; every beginning is to be traced to it, in so far as it brings the chance of salvation and the possibility of being saved. But that is external grace; inner grace is that which lays hold of a man, enlightens, chastens, and sanctifies him, and penetrates his will as well as his intelligence. Human virtue can neither grow nor be perfected without this grace—therefore the virtues of the heathens are very small. ***But the beginnings of the good resolve, good thoughts, and faith—understood as the preparation of grace—can be due to ourselves.*** Hence grace is absolutely necessary in order to reach final salvation (perfection), but not so much in order to make a start. It accompanies us at all stages of our inner growth, and our exertions are of no avail without it; but it only supports and accompanies him who really strives....even this...action of grace is not irresistible." (Harnack, pg. 247, my emphasis).

After Augustine's death in August 430, his theological teaching prospered (literally!) in his stalwart champion and friend **Prosper** (a.k.a. **St. Prosper of Aquitaine**). Prosper spent many years teaching Augustine's doctrines of sin and grace, but then realized that perhaps now that Pelagianism had been formally condemned, and was unacceptable by most orthodox Christians, that rather than merely defending Augustinianism, that a more subtle and dangerous heresy could be found in Semi-Pelagianism, and should be addressed. Prosper addressed this problem in **Contra Collatorem**, a book written against the teachings of John Cassian ("contra collatorem" means "against the author of conferences" because Cassian was making himself and his theology popularly known through books and conferences). Prosper continued to counter the teaching and doctrines of Semi-Pelagianism for most of his life.

Semi-Pelagianism flourished and grew in Southern France (Gaul). **Faustus of Riez** forced his priest to retract Augustinian views of sin and grace, and wrote a book called **The Grace of God and Free Will** that was in many ways **Neo-Pelagian** in doctrine. By 519, Faustus' orthodoxy is being suspected, and a synod is called to condemn his views in 523. His views were denounced as heretical both at Constantinople and at Rome.

In 529 AD, a man named **Caesarius** (c. 469-542), a monk in Southern France (Gaul) and later a Bishop of Arles, held the **Synod in Orange**, which was later approved by Pope Boniface II (530-532). The Synod of Orange condemned both Pelagianism and Semi-Pelagianism and endorsed an Augustinianism that was drawn largely from Prosper's writings and teachings.

The Augustinian interpretation of sin and grace were once again articulated against the Semi-Pelagian view made popular by **John Cassian and Faustus of Riez**. Though Pope Boniface II (531) made Orange the basis of medieval teaching on grace, Semi-Pelagianism would continue to be popular, and Augustinianism would be softened throughout the Medieval period.

Important Augustinian-Biblical Propositions Affirmed at the Council (Synod) of Orange (Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. 3, pgs. 867-69).

- The sin of Adam has not injured the body only, but also the soul of man.
- The sin of Adam has brought sin and death upon all mankind.
- Grace is not merely bestowed when we pray for it, but grace itself causes us to pray for it.
- Even the beginning of faith, the disposition to believe, is effected by grace.
- All good thoughts and works are God's gifts.
- Even the regenerate and the saints need continually the divine help.
- What God loves in us, is not our merit, but his own gift.
- All good that we possess is God's gift, and therefore no one should boast.

The Synod of Orange formally ended the Pelagian and Semi-Pelagian controversy as accepted orthodox positions within the Church, but practically a variation of Pelagianism would continue to be acceptable in the form of **Semi-Augustinianism**. The reason that Semi-Augustinianism, or a moderate form of Augustine's teaching flourished in certain teachers after the Council of Orange in 529 was because the Synod failed to articulate Augustine's teaching on predestination and irresistible grace. The Synod was faithful to deny Semi-Pelagianism, but they could have been stronger on their articulation of Augustine's faithful interpretation of the Apostle Paul.

The Semi-Pelagian Theological Via Media between Augustine and Pelagius

In the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* Semi-Pelagianism is defined this way: "The name given to doctrines upheld in the fifth century by a group of theologians who, while not denying the necessity of grace for salvation, maintained that the first steps towards the Christian life were ordinarily taken by the human will and God's grace supervened later." (ODCC, 1481).

Semi-Pelagianism is a **synergistic soteriological system** and states that man *cooperates* with the grace that God gives before his conversion, and he has the power to choose grace, which is in disagreement with Augustine (and more importantly the Apostle Paul). The difference theologically between Augustine and Cassian is the difference between **Monergism and Synergism**. The Semi-Pelagians, in order to align themselves theologically with Christ's and Paul's clear teaching on the sinfulness of man, wrote that man was not dead in his natural state, merely sick and he needed some form of Grace and help from God as a prerequisite for salvation.

As Philip Schaff summarizes in his *History of the Christian Church* (Vol. III, pg. 861): "In opposition to both systems (Augustinianism and Pelagianism), Cassian taught that the divine image and human freedom in man were not completely in bondage, but were only weakened by the fall; in other words, that man is sick, but not dead, that he cannot indeed help himself, but that

he can desire the help of a physician, and either accept or refuse it when offered, and that he must cooperate with the grace of God in his salvation.

Semi-Pelagianism in response to Augustine's teaching on **predestination and irresistible grace** affirmed that God chose based on a decision that he had foreseen in man, and that a person had the power to resist God's Spirit and grace when acted upon. Semi-Pelagianism makes the mistake of interpreting Romans 8:28 based on a foreseen faith, as well as misunderstanding the primacy of regeneration before a person's faith. The two theological issues here are:

(1) How dead is man when Paul says "dead in trespasses and sins" in Ephesians 2:1-3, and how unable is man to seek after God and his grace as a sinner as Paul teaches in Romans 3:9-23.

(2) Does regeneration precede (as well as include the gift of) our faith as Paul teaches in Ephesians 2:4-10 and as Jesus says clearly in John 6:44, or does our faith precede our regeneration (as the Semi-Pelagians teach).

Even though man is fallen and sick, he still has an island of righteousness within him to choose the help of God. To agree with classical predestinationism (because this was the official position of the Church at this time and a clear teaching in the writings of Paul) they stated that God had *prescience*, or foreknowledge, of who would choose this grace, and that God on this basis would in time and space regenerate or justify these people. In other words, the Semi-Pelagians would not have wholly denied predestination, they would have merely redefined it to be God foreseeing one's faith, then predestinating them to life.

**Semi-Pelagians rejected Augustine's
doctrine of predestination and irresistible
grace.**

Synod of Orange (529)/Semi-Augustinianism

In 529 A.D. the Church condemned Semi-Pelagianism at the Council (or Synod) of Orange as being heretical. Augustine's doctrine of sin and grace was adopted as the anthropology, or teaching on sinful man of the Western Church. The most important leaders of the Church remained true, for the most part, to the Augustinian anthropological system for two or three centuries after Augustine. They stood with Augustine in his classical position that God could not have chosen men based on their decision for good, because they would never have chosen the good, being unable to do so.

This variation on the Augustinian doctrine came to be known as **Semi-Augustinianism** because it denied the doctrine of absolute or particularistic predestination and affirmed that an individual could cooperate with God's grace through the sacramental system where grace is found according to Medieval Roman Catholic Teaching. Semi-Augustinianism sounds a little more acceptable perhaps, but the truth is this:

Semi-Augustinianism in contrast to Semi-Pelagianism is less individualistic and more ecclesiastical in its focus, but both systems deny the absolute sovereignty of God in predestination, and give man the inherent ability to cooperate with grace synergistically.

Semi-Augustinians disagreed with the teaching of the Semi-Pelagians (not only because they were moderate Augustinians, but because the teaching was condemned) because they placed the emphasis on the **Doctrine of Prevenient Grace** given to all, rather than on the ability of the will of all men. In other words, their focus and emphasis was attempting to be on God's grace, rather than on man's will. The Semi-Augustinian doctrine was best represented at the close of this period by **Gregory the Great** who represented the moderated Augustinian system.

Gregory's moderated Augustinianism would be one of the greatest influences on Medieval Theology and the majority of the Medieval Church, but the strict and faithful ("biblical") Augustinianism had its adherents in Bede, Alcuin, and Isidore of Seville. These who held to the what was considered the "stricter" or more conservative Augustinian teaching would confess and affirm irresistible grace and predestination. These doctrines would be repressed during much of the Medieval period, and would become prominent again in the Gottschalk controversy in the 9th century, again repressed, and would return in the teachings of Wycliffe and Hus, precursors to the Reformation, and climatically championed by Martin Luther.

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