

## LESSON SEVENTEEN – Augustine, Pelagianism and Semi-Pelagianism

### Augustine of Hippo

- Augustine serves as the climax of patristic thought in Latin and was the dominant influence on the Latin Middle Ages, so much to be called the, “Architect of the Middle Ages.”
- Augustine has continued to be a major influence in theology for both Roman Catholics and Protestants.
- Of greatest importance and influence is Augustine’s *Confessions*, the first spiritual autobiography in Christianity. *Confessions* became a religious classic because of its penetrating analysis of sin and human nature, but it is also a great source material for the psychology of religion.
- Books 1-9 are autobiographical of *Confessions*, praising God for His graces earlier in Augustine’s life despite his own sins; book 10 is epistemological on knowledge, time, memory, and the church; and books 11-13 are an allegorical exegesis of Genesis, praising God with regard to Augustine’s present state. Augustine wrote this classic around 400, twelve years after his mother Monica’s death.
- Augustine was born in 354 in Tagaste, a minor commercial city in North Africa. His mother, Monica, was a Christian and later canonized as a saint.
- His father, Patricius, was a member of the local ruling class, a pagan but baptized just before his death.
- Both parents were aware of their child’s exceptional gifts and therefore sought for him to have the best education as possible. To that end they sent him to the nearby town of Madaura until their resources ran out and Augustine had to return to Tagaste.
- There according to his own reports, he wandered:

**“With my companions through the public squares of Babylon and wallowed in their mud as if it were cinnamon and precious ointments.”<sup>1</sup>**

- With these friends, he boasted of his sexual adventures, real or imagined and joined in capers that he would one day rue as a sign of his own sinfulness.
- Eventually, thanks to the support of a man named Romanianus, he was able to travel to Carthage to continue his studies. Augustine was around 17 years old at that time.
- As all young men of his time preparing for careers as lawyers or public functionaries, Augustine was a student of rhetoric.
- The purpose of this discipline was to learn to speak and to write elegantly and convincingly. Truth was not an issue. That was left to the philosophers. But among the many ancient works a student of rhetoric had to read were those of Cicero, the famous orator of classical Rome.
- Cicero, besides being a master of language was also a philosopher. It was reading Cicero that Augustine came to the conclusion that proper speech and style were not sufficient; one must also seek truth.
- That search for truth led the young student to Manichaeism.

- In Augustine's time, Manichaeism had spread throughout the Mediterranean basin. Its main appeal was its claim to be rational.
- Manichaeism seemed to address Augustine's difficulties with Christianity, which centered on two issues. The first was that, from the point of view of rhetoric, the Bible was a series of inelegant writings, some even barbaric, in which the rules of good style were seldom followed and where one found crude episodes of violence, rape, deceit and the like.
- The second was the question of the origin of evil. Monica had taught Augustine that there was only one God but Augustine saw evil both around and in himself and had to ask about the source of such evil.
- If God was supreme and pure goodness, evil could not be a divine creation. And if, on the other hand, all things were created by the divine, God could not be as good and wise as Monica and the church claimed.
- Manichaeism offered answers to these two points. The Bible, particularly the Old Testament, was not in fact the Word of the eternal principle of light, nor was evil a creation of that principle, but of its opposite, the principle of darkness.
- For these reasons, Augustine became a Manichean. But there were always doubts and he spent nine years as a "hearer," without seeking to join the ranks of the "perfect."
- When at Manichean gatherings, he vented some of his doubts, he was told his questions were very profound and that there was a great Manichean teacher named Faustus, who could answer them.
- When the much-anticipated Faustus finally arrived, he turned out to be no better than the other Manichean teachers.
- By then, after spending some time back in Tagaste, Augustine had returned to Carthage as a teacher; but his students in Carthage were an unruly lot and a career in Rome seemed more promising. Rome was not as great as he anticipated and he shortly moved on to Milan.
- In Milan, Simplicianus, the same person on whom Ambrose had called to be his tutor in theology introduced Augustine to the writings of the Neoplatonists.
- As a result of his reading, Augustine became a Neoplatonist. Neoplatonism, very popular at the time, was a philosophy with religious overtones. Through a combination of study, discipline and mystical contemplation it sought to reach the ineffable One, the source of all being.
- Unlike Manichaean dualism, Neoplatonism affirmed that there was only one principle, and that all reality was derived from it through a series of emanations, much like the concentric circles that appear on the surface of the water when hit by a pebble.
- Those realities that are closer to the One are superior and those that are more removed from it are inferior. Evil then does not originate from a different source but only consists simply in moving away from the One. Moral evil consists in looking away from the One and turning one's gaze to inferior realms of multiplicity.
- This seemed to answer Augustine's vexing questions as to the origins of evil. From this perspective, one could assert that a single being, of infinite goodness, was the source of all things and at the same time acknowledge the presence of evil in creation.

- Evil, though real, is not a “thing,” but rather a direction away from the goodness of the One. Also, Neoplatonism helped Augustine to view both God and the soul in incorporeal terms.
- There remained another doubt: How can one claim that the Bible, with its crude language and its stories of violence, is the Word of God? Providing the answer to this question was the role of Ambrose in Augustine’s life.
- As a professor of rhetoric, Augustine agreed to attend the services led by the famous speaker in Milan. His initial purpose was not to hear what Ambrose had to say, but to see how he said it. However, as time went by, he found that he was listening to the bishop less as a professional and more as a seeker.
- By then, Augustine’s major intellectual difficulties with Christianity had been solved. But there were other difficulties to sort out. He could not be a lukewarm Christian. Were he to accept his mother’s faith, he would do it wholeheartedly and he would devote his entire life to it.
- At this point a battle raged within himself. It was a struggle between willing and not willing. He had already decided to become a Christian, but not too soon.
- He could no longer hide behind the intellectual difficulties. Furthermore, from all quarters came news that put him to shame.
- In Rome the famous philosopher Marius Victorinus, who had translated the works of the Neoplatonists into Latin, had presented himself to the church and made a public profession of faith. Then came news of two high civil servants who, upon reading Athanasius’s *Life of Saint Anthony*, had abandoned career and honor in order to follow the hermit’s example. It was then, unable to tolerate the company of his friends or himself that Augustine fled to the garden, where his conversion took place.

**“Take up and read. Take up and read. Take up and read.” These words, probably shouted by a playing child, floated over the fence of the garden in Milan and struck the ears of the dejected professor of rhetoric who sat under a fig tree and cried, “How long, Lord, how long? Will it be tomorrow and always tomorrow? Why does my uncleanness not end this very moment?” The child’s words seemed to him words from heaven. Shortly before, elsewhere in the garden he had put down a manuscript he was reading. Now he returned to the spot, took up the manuscript and read the words of Paul, “Not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.” Responding to those words, Augustine made the decision that he had been postponing for a long time: he devoted himself to the service of God.<sup>2</sup>**

- After his conversion, Augustine took the necessary steps to embark on a new life. He requested baptism, which he and his son, Adeodatus, received from Ambrose.
- He resigned his teaching post and along with his mother and son returned to North Africa. Monica persuaded Augustine to dismiss his concubine of many years and whose name Augustine never mentions in his writings. On the way to North Africa, Monica became ill and died.

- When Augustine arrived in Tagaste he sold most of his property that he had inherited, gave some money to the poor and used to rest to settle in Cassiciacum with his son, who died shortly after.
- It was in Cassiciacum that Augustine wrote his first Christian works. He hoped that the few dialogues he wrote in Cassiciacum would be only the beginning of many years devoted to philosophical life.
- In 391 Augustine visited the town of Hippo in order to talk to a friend whom he wanted to invite to join the small community at Cassiciacum.
- While at Hippo he attended church and Bishop Valerius, who saw him in the congregation, preached about how God always sends shepherds for the flock and then asked the congregation to pray for God's guidance in case there was among them someone sent to be their minister.
- The congregation responded exactly as the bishop had expected and Augustine, much against his will, was ordained to serve with Valerius in Hippo.
- Four years later, he was made bishop alongside Valerius. Since at that time it was forbidden for a bishop to leave his church for another, Augustine's consecration to serve as a bishop jointly with Valerius guaranteed that he would spend the rest of his days in Hippo. Valerius died a short time later.
- As a minister and as a bishop, Augustine sought to retain as much as possible of the lifestyle he had sought in Cassiciacum. But now his energies had to be directed less toward contemplation and more toward his pastoral responsibilities.
- Many of Augustine's first writings were attempts to refute the Manichaeans.
- The question of the freedom of the will was of particular importance in the polemics against the Manichaeans.
- Another movement that Augustine had to refute was Donatism. Throughout his career Augustine had to deal with various issues raised by the Donatists.
- One of these was the question of whether ordinations conferred by unworthy bishops were valid. To this, Augustine responded that the validity of any rite of the church does not depend on the moral virtue of the person administering it. If it were so, Christians would live in constant doubt as to the validity of their baptisms. No matter how unworthy the celebrant, the rite is still valid.
- On this point, most of the Western church through the centuries has agreed with Augustine, whose views on the church and on the validity of the sacraments became normative in the West.
- It was also in dealing with the Donatists that Augustine developed his Just War Theory.
- The purpose of war must be just, a war is never just when its purpose is to satisfy territorial ambition or the mere exercise of power.
- Secondly, is that war must be waged by properly instituted authority. This seemed necessary in order to prevent personal vendettas.
- The third rule and the most important one to Augustine was that even in the midst of the violence, that is a necessary part of war, the motive of love must be central.
- We have already mentioned Augustine's *Confessions*, which was a spiritual autobiography, addressed in a prayer to God, which tells how God led him to faith

through a long and painful pilgrimage. It is unique in its genre, in all of ancient literature and even to this day it witnesses to Augustine's profound psychological and intellectual insight.

- The other work worthy of special mention is *The City of God*. The immediate motive impelling Augustine to write it was the Fall of Rome in 410. Since there were many who still clung to ancient paganism at that time, some charged that Rome had fallen because it had abandoned its ancient gods and turned to Christianity.
- It was to respond to such allegations that Augustine wrote *The City of God*, a vast encyclopedic history in which he claims there are two cities, that is two social orders, each built on a foundation of love. The city of God is built on the love of God. The earthly city is built on the love of self. In human history, these two cities always appear mingled with each other. But in spite of this there is between the two of them an irreconcilable opposition, a fight to the death. In the end, only the city of God will remain.
- Meanwhile, human history is filled with kingdoms and nations, all built on love of self, which are no more than passing expressions of the earthly city. All of these kingdoms and nations, no matter how powerful, will wither and pass away, until the end of time, when only the city of God will remain standing. In the case of Rome in particular, God allowed it and its empire to flourish so that they served as a means for spreading the gospel.
- Now that this purpose had been fulfilled, God has let Rome follow the destiny of all human kingdoms, which is simply a punishment for their sins.
- Augustine was the last of the great leaders of the Imperial Church in the West. When he died the Vandals were at the gates of Hippo, announcing a new age.
- Augustine's work was not forgotten among the ruins of a crumbling civilization. On the contrary, through his writings he became the teacher of the new age.
- Throughout the Middle Ages, no theologian was quoted more than Augustine and he became one the great theologians of the Roman Catholic Church. But he is also a favorite theologian of the great Protestant Reformers of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, Augustine has become the most influential theologian in the entire Western church, both Protestant and Catholic.

## **Pelagius**

- Pelagius was born in 350 in Britain. His father was a physician who had accompanied the bureaucrats there and had married a Celt. Both were Christians and had high ambitions for their son, who was a commanding figure.
- By 390 Pelagius was in Rome, where he had come to study law and where he was baptized. He gained influence as a moral reformer and spiritual director. Although an ascetic in reaction against the looseness of Christian life in Rome, he did not advocate a withdrawal from society.
- Pelagius had a good background in the classics and the earlier church fathers, but he was especially well grounded in the Scriptures. There he found such ideas as free will, moral conduct, doing the will of the Father, good works, following the example of Jesus Christ, and a system of reward and punishment.

- Pelagius distinguished capacity, will and action. Grace applies only to the first, as the creation of God. Will and action are altogether in human power. Pelagius located grace in things external to ourselves, the law and teachings of Jesus, in forgiveness and in the example of Christ.
- Pelagius was not a theologian, much less a mystic; rather, he was a moralist. His view is summed up in the statement,

**“We confess that man always has free will.”<sup>3</sup>**

- God the Father of all justice, makes no exception of persons, and he does not demand the impossible. Human perfection is possible; therefore, it is obligatory.
- Pelagius left Rome in 410 with other refugees from the Visigoths and his ideas provoked sharp reactions in North Africa by the bold and extreme way Pelagius’s follower Celestius presented them.
- In 411 the church in Carthage rejected Celestius for ordination and condemned him for his teachings. Celestius moved onto Sicily and Pelagius departed for Palestine. It was at that time that Augustine began a formal refutation specifically directed at Pelagius.
- Pelagius saw the Christian life as a constant effort through which one’s sins could be overcome and salvation attained. Pelagius agreed with Augustine that God has made us free and that the source of evil is in the will.
- As he saw matters, this meant that human beings always have the ability to overcome their sin. Otherwise, sin would be excusable.
- But Augustine remembered when he both willed and did not will to become a Christian. This meant that human will was not as simple as Pelagius characterized it. There are times when the will is powerless against the hold sin has on it.
- The will is not always its own master, for it is clear that the will to will does not always have its way nor can the will do that which its fallen condition does not permit it to even imagine.
- According to Augustine, the power of sin is such that it takes hold of our will, and as long as we are under its sway, we cannot move our will to be rid of it. The most we can accomplish is to struggle between willing and not willing, which does little more than show the powerlessness of our will against itself. The sinner can will nothing but sin. Within that condition, there are certainly good and bad choices; but even the best choices still fall within the category of sin.
- This does not mean, however, that freedom has disappeared. The sinner is still free to choose among various alternatives. But all of these are sin, and the one alternative that is not open is to cease sinning.
- According to Augustine, before the fall we were free both to sin and not to sin. But between the fall and redemption the only freedom left to us is the freedom to sin.
- When we are redeemed, the grace of God works in us, leading our will from the miserable state in which it found itself to a new state in which freedom is restored, so that we are now free to both to sin and not to sin.
- Back to the moment of conversion, how can we make the decision to accept grace? According to Augustine, only by the power of grace itself, for before that moment we are

not free not to sin and therefore we are not free to decide to accept grace. The initiative in conversion is not human, but divine. Furthermore, grace is irresistible and God gives it to those who have been predestined to it.

- In contrast, Pelagius claimed that each of us comes to the world with complete freedom to sin or not to sin. There is no such thing as original sin nor the corruption of human nature that forces us to sin. Children have no sin until they, out of their own free will, decide to sin.
- Pelagius and Celestius also taught that Adam was made mortal and would have died even if he had not sinned; the law as well as the gospel leads to the kingdom of heaven; before the coming of Jesus Christ there were people who lived without sin; and the whole race does not die because of the sin of Adam and Eve or rise because of the resurrection of Christ.
- The implication of these teachings was that a person can live without sin and observe all the commands of God.
- At a conference in Jerusalem, Pelagius successfully defended himself but Jerome, with encouragement from Augustine, began writing his *Dialogue Against the Pelagians*. The eastern theologians were disposed to give more attention to free will and human deeds, and a council at Lydda in 415 declared Pelagius orthodox.
- The North Africans were of a different mind and a council at Carthage in 416 called on the bishop of Rome to condemn Pelagius.
- Innocent I in 417 confirmed their condemnation but after Innocent died, Zosimus, the new bishop of Rome was more favorable to Pelagius and reinstated him later in 417.
- The angered the North African bishops at a council in Carthage in 418 approved nine canons dealing with Pelagianism.
- Three canons were on original sin, pronouncing anathema on those who say death is not the result of Adam's sin, on those who say a newborn child is not condemned to eternal punishment for what was acquired from Adam and on those who assert a distinction between the kingdom of heaven and eternal life. The Pelagians made a distinction in order to avoid the argument from John 3:5 on the necessity of baptism for newborn children to receive eternal life.
- Three more canons were on grace, anathemizing those who say grace only brings remission of past sins, those who say grace aids us in understanding and those who say grace only enables us to do more easily what we ought to do.
- The last three canons, on sin, pronounced an anathema on those who say I John 1:8 confesses sin only from humility; on those who say the petition in the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our trespasses," applies only to the congregation, not necessarily the individual; and on those who say this phrase out of humility, not truly.
- At this point the state intervened, and the emperor Honorius in 418 banished Pelagius and his followers. Zosimus followed suit, excommunicating Pelagius and Celestius.
- Eighteen Italian bishops refused to sign Zosimus's condemnation of Pelagius and Julian of Eclanum assumed leadership of the Pelagian position.

## Semi-Pelagianism

- The first phase of the Pelagian controversy was Augustine's controversy with Pelagius and then with Julian of Eclanum.
- A second phase had already begun before Augustine's death when in 427 his writings on grace and predestination reached Gaul. Monks in southern Gaul sought a middle course between what they saw as the extremes of Pelagianism and the extremes of Augustinianism.
- The leading intellectual figure in monasticism in southern Gaul was John Cassian, abbot of St Victor in Masillia (modern Marseilles).
- Born in Scythia in 365, Cassian joined a monastery in Bethlehem and then left to study monasticism in Egypt. After a time in Constantinople, Cassian established himself in the West.
- Cassian presented his own views on the relation of grace and free will in his work called *Conferences*. He rejected Pelagianism, but he also rejected Augustine's predestination, particularism of grace and complete bondage of the will.
- Cassian affirmed the paradox that everything is the work of God's grace, yet everything can be ascribed to free will. The divine image and human freedom were weakened but not destroyed by the fall; human beings are sick but not dead in sin and trespasses. A person cannot help himself, but he can desire help and can accept or refuse it when offered. Either the human will or God's grace may take the initiative in an individual's salvation.
- Theologically, Cassian affirmed that every beginning of human salvation is founded on God's grace. But he argued that this external grace is supplemented by internal grace, which acts on mind and will to effect sanctification.
- He also granted that God wills the salvation of all, and that predestination is based on foreknowledge of those who accept or reject His grace.
- In addition to Cassian and other who articulated an alternative to Augustine's theology of grace, there were also those conservatives who simply reacted against the novelty of Augustine's teaching.
- One such conservative, Vincent of Lerins, pointed out what were to him the illogical and blasphemous deductions from Augustine's doctrine, namely that God was responsible for sin and damnation.
- Vincent appealed to church tradition for his argument against Augustine's theology. According to Victor we are to fortify ourselves in the true faith, first by the authority of Scripture; second, Scripture is to be interpreted by the tradition of the church, especially as expressed in the decisions of ecumenical councils.
- If the question has not been addressed by the councils, Scripture is to be interpreted by the agreement of the Church Fathers on the matter.
- The first stages of the Pelagian controversy were over but they were certainly not settled. Pelagianism was rejected but many were not satisfied with the later formulations of Augustine.



- The Semi-Pelagianians also did not win the day, for the Augustinians had their responses to Augustine's critics.
- The third phase of the Pelagian controversy was the Augustinians response to the Semi-Pelagianians in Gaul.
- The principal champion of Augustine's ideas was Prosper of Aquitaine. He replied to Cassian and sought the aid of Pope Celestine against semi-pelagianism.
- For Prosper the key issue was the utterly gratuitous character of grace, and he saw the cause of disagreement as differing estimations of the effect of the fall on the human capacity for good. Prosper's response to the objections others lodged against Augustine's position defended predestination and perseverance, but introduced foreknowledge of wrongdoing as the reason for God's withholding the grace of perseverance from some.
- Prosper's *On the Calling of the Gentiles* wrestled with God's will to save all, a troublesome concept for Augustinians. He explained that God's general grace invited all, and he interpreted I Timothy 2:4 (who desires all people to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth) as God's will that prayer be made for the salvation of all.
- Although he was conciliatory about the place of the human will in salvation, Prosper's case was ultimately unsatisfactory because his emphasis on the necessity of special grace for salvation was inconsistent with the universal saving will of God.
- A fourth phase in the controversy saw renewed opposition to strict Augustinianism as expressed by Lucidus, whose views on predestination were condemned in a synod at Arles in 473. Faustus, abbot of Lerins in 433 and then bishop of Rhegium in 458 wrote *On Grace* to oppose predestination. He sought to locate a middle position between Pelagius and Augustine, affirming both the freedom of the will and the necessity of grace. Avitus, bishop of Vienne and Fulgentius, bishop of Ruspe in North Africa affirmed Augustinianism against Faustus.
- The final phase of the conflict over human nature and salvation saw the triumph of what may be called "semi-Augustinianism," as expressed by Caesarius, bishop of Arles. Caesarius was one of the most important bishops of his time.
- Although Caesarius had been trained at the monastery at Lerins, he adopted a moderate Augustinianism that incorporated Augustine's emphasis on the priority of grace, accepted the monastic emphasis on good works and their reward at the judgement, and passed over the more controversial aspects of Augustine's teaching on predestination and perseverance.
- Caesarius's views were approved by a small synod of bishops gathered at Orange in 529 and given wider currency by Pope Boniface II's endorsement in 531. The main points were the following:

**"Humanity is under original sin and has lost all power to turn to God. Prevenient grace (grace preceding any good will or work) is affirmed against the Semipelagians. Baptism is the decisive conferral of grace, forgiving original sin and renewing the capacity to choose good. All who receive grace in baptism can be saved if they work faithfully. Thus, the basis was laid for the medieval compromise that insisted on the theological priority of grace and the pastoral emphasis on achieving merit by good works."**<sup>4</sup>

- Even though Caesarius and the Council of Orange were largely Augustinian, their view allowed for predestination to grace but not for predestination to glory which was the absolute gift of perseverance.
- Although there continued to be adherents of a strict Augustinianism, the general view in the Latin West was that of Pope Gregory, accepted prevenient grace without its irresistible particular aspects.

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<sup>1</sup> The Story of Christianity, Volume One, Gonzalez, Justo L., page 242

<sup>2</sup> The Story of Christianity, Gonzalez, Justo L., page 241

<sup>3</sup> Church History, Volume One, Ferguson, Everett, page 280

<sup>4</sup> Church History Volume One, Everett Ferguson, page 301