**The Church of the Servant King**
Soteriology Series

**SO_6_Predestination & Election – Part 3 –**
**The Historical Background – 1st through 6th Centuries**

*Introduction*

I want to begin this lesson with a quote that I thought was excellent and that I have included on our website.  It succinctly states my philosophy and approach that I have tried to take to this topic and it was an encouragement to me when I came across it.

> Pastors would do well to synthesize Christian doctrine for their people.  Too many Christians have a fragmentary knowledge of their faith; they lack understanding of how teachings fit together.  Among other things, our churches need a revival of the teaching of systematic theology from the pulpit and in Sunday School.  In the post-modern world at the turn of the century, Christians need to learn biblical truth in order to live for God.  They are bombarded with moral relativism and need to learn to evaluate experience on the basis of biblical doctrine.  If their pastor's don't help them, who will?[1]

In this week's lesson, we will focus upon the historical background and climate that gave rise to the modern debate surrounding predestination and election.  This should serve to provide a better appreciation for some of the views that we will be exploring in upcoming weeks.  It will not be possible to separate any discussion of the historical background for this issue from the individuals of significance involved.  However, I will save any extensive analysis of the views of certain individuals until a future lesson.

It is important to note that in our study of the historical development of the doctrine of predestination and election, the historical debate is centered upon the issues of sin, free will, and the grace of God as it relates to a man's salvation.  We will examine the ramifications of various views in future lessons as the logic that results from this debate extends to man's free will in regard to life after salvation, i.e. Phase 2 of the believer's life.

*Historical Developments and Significant Persons Central to the Issue*

*Early church history (1st thru 4th Centuries)* – during early church history, the doctrine of predestination was held in a rather undeveloped form until serious disagreement arose regarding it.  No figure emerged with any formulation of the doctrine in spite of the fact that there was a growing conviction of the sinfulness of humans and of the need for some type of transforming grace.[2]  This is not to imply that there weren't elements that would constitute the seed of what would eventually flower into the debates to follow; however, no significant figure dominated the theological scene during this period with any systematized body of thought on the subject.

*Augustine (A.D. 354 – 430)* – responsible for initially developing the logical implications of the sinfulness of man and the need for transforming grace into a systemized body of thought.  He stressed that Adam had begun life truly free with the only limitations upon his free will consisting

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[1]  Robert A. Peterson, Sr., *Calvin and the Atonement* (Christian Focus, 1999), 123.

[2]  Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan:  Baker Book House, 1995), 908.

of the inherent limitations imposed by his humanity itself.  Therefore, the possibility existed of turning from the good (i.e. satisfaction of God's righteousness which was inherent in a sinless creature).  When Adam sinned, he became tainted in nature and transmitted this inclination toward evil to his descendants.  Augustine believed that man thereby lost his freedom to abstain from evil and to do the good (i.e. satisfy God's righteousness).  Man still had free will, but he would inevitably use free will contrary to God's intention.  Without any divine assistance, man could not choose and do the good.[3]

Augustine's views of sin and grace were shaped by his past as a person "who wandered far from the path of morality and religion" according to his *Confessions*.[4]  In other words, Augustine had a lascivious trend in his sin nature and when he came to the point in his life where he sought salvation, he realized he was inherently evil and incapable of satisfying God's righteousness on his own.  His conversion took place after a period of never finding rest during the years of his wanderings.[5]

There is certainly a lot of truth in Augustine's views.  He should be commended for his humility in realizing that he was incapable of generating the righteousness required of God on his own.  Nevertheless, the paradigm that emerged from these seeds of a systematized theology began to be shaped in time to embody elements that contained inherent contradictions.  We'll see some of the contradictions develop as we progress in our study.

*Pelagius (A.D. 360 – 420)* – a British monk who relocated to Rome to be a teacher and who was primarily a moralist rather than a theologian.  His moralist slant no doubt arose from his sin nature trend toward asceticism.  He was a man of "austere life, of a blameless character, and of an even temper, and perhaps partly for that very reason a stranger to those conflicts of the soul, those struggles with sin, and those deep experiences of an all-renewing grace, which had such profound influence in moulding Augustine's thought."[6]

Pelagius considered Augustine's emphasis upon the "extreme corruption of human nature and its corollary, human inability, to be both demoralizing to any genuine effort at righteous living and insulting to God as well."[7]  He did not believe that Adam's fall had any direct effect upon a person's ability to do "the good" (i.e. satisfy God's righteousness).  Man does not inherit from Adam either evil or a tendency to evil according to Pelagius.  His rationale was that surely a God who forgives each person his or her own sin would not hold any of us responsible for the act of another.  Adam was merely a bad example.

Regarding the necessity of divine intervention in a man's salvation, Pelagius did not believe in any internal work of God upon the soul.  He believed that God did not make any special choice of certain persons and grace was equally available to all.  While he was not necessarily wrong on the latter point, his ascetic lifestyle of human good led him to believe that grace was defined as a combination of man's "free will, apprehension of God through reason, and the law of Moses and the example of Christ."[8]  A person's progress in holiness is accomplished by human

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[3]  Ibid., 908-909.

[4]  Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines* (Grand Rapids, Michigan:  Baker Book House, 1937), 131.

[5]  Ibid.

[6]  Ibid., 132.

[7]  Erickson, 909.

[8]  Ibid., 910.

merit.  God's predestining of persons was based entirely upon his foreseeing the quality of their lives.

Pelagianism was vigorously attacked by Augustine.  These attacks no doubt led to the condemnation of Pelagianism by the Council of Ephesus in A.D. 431.  Augustine more fully developed his views of predestination during these attacks.  In brief, Augustine's view that materialized was that without God's grace, man is unable to avoid sin and to possess a righteousness compatible with God's righteousness.  To meet God's righteousness required an even greater grace, i.e. God working with man's will based upon God's omniscient understanding of those conditions under which a man will freely choose what God wills.  Augustine's logic led him to conclude that man's choice was related to whether God chose to give grace to some and not others.[9]  I think that you can see the seeds here of Calvin's view of predestination.

*Semi-Pelagianism (5th – 6th Centuries)* – After the condemnation of Pelagianism by the Council of Ephesus in A.D. 431, a synergism of Augustinianism and Pelagianism developed.  This synergistic view came to be known as semi-pelagianism.  This view held that God and man together accomplished what must be done in order to be saved.  Man was seen as corrupt, but fallen human nature was viewed as capable of co-operating with divine grace.  Regeneration was viewed as the product of both factors.[10]  Apparently the flaw of semi-pelagianism was that man was viewed as making too great a contribution to his own salvation.

To the extent that semi-pelagianism adhered to the Pelagian error in regard to man's contribution to his own salvation, I would agree that this movement was in error.  However, to date, I've not found an extensive analysis of the movement to determine to what extent man was viewed as contributing to the process.  It is important to note that many times anyone who doesn't adhere to a Calvinistic view of faith as a gift based upon Ephesians 2:8-9 (verses man receiving the gift of salvation through faith) is labeled a semi-pelagian.  This is an unfortunate thing and it reflects the tendency among Christians toward a self-righteousness based upon the perceived correctness of one's views.  The sin nature in man (even Christians) feeds man's ego through approbation lust and the desire to feel just a little closer, a little more righteous in God's eyes than the other Christian.

Semi-Pelagianism was condemned by the Synod of Orange in A.D. 529.  Although the synod spoke in strong terms of the inability of man and the necessity of divine grace, it did not insist on absolute predestination and irresistible grace.[11]  Absolute predestination is the doctrine that through an immutable decree, God has determined who is to be saved and salvation doesn't depend upon man in any way.  It carries the idea that man is so depraved and tainted by sin that he is not even capable of producing an acceptable faith for even faith is viewed as a work from a depraved person.  When the correct view that man is totally depraved is incorrectly applied to the issue of predestination and election, then only eisegesis or "illegitimate totality transfer"[12] can

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[9]  Ibid., 911.  As an interesting aside, the author also notes that Augustine believed that God's choice of the number of men to whom this irresistible grace was to be granted was equal to the number needed to replace the fallen angels.  As I have already noted during class in the prior lesson, Augustine's view has been the basis for some who understand the doctrine of the Angelic Conflict to conclude that the Rapture of the Church will occur when the number of saved Church Age believers equals the number of demons.  There is really no Scriptural support for such a view even though there is admittedly a logical attractiveness to it when considered in view of the Angelic Conflict as presented in the previous lesson.

[10]  Berkhof, 138.

[11]  Erickson, 911.

[12]  James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Languages* (London:  Oxford University Press, 1961), 218 quoted in Joseph C. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings* (Haysville, NC:  Schottle

derive Biblical support for the necessity of God to provide faith as a gift to those to whom He chooses to elect.[13]

In our next lesson, we will continue to trace the historical background and development of this doctrine forward to the Reformation and even to the current day.

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Publishing Company, 1993), 29.  An "illegitimate totality transfer" is defined by Barr as "the error that arises, when the 'meaning' of a word (understood as the total series of relations in which it is used in the literature) is read into a particular case as its sense and implication there, may be called 'illegitimate totality transfer.'"

[13] See Norman Geisler, *Chosen, But Free* (Minneapolis, Minnesota:  Bethany House Publishers, 1999), 181-191 for an excellent analysis of this issue.  I highly recommend this book to those who want an more in-depth analysis of this subject than what will be possible in this series of lessons.