

The Church of the Servant King Soteriology Series

SO_6_Predestination & Election – Part 3 – The Historical Background – 5th and 6th Centuries

Last week, we studied two very prominent figures in early Church history who had significant impact upon the development of the doctrine of predestination and election. Augustine (A.D. 354 – 430), influenced by his licentious past, believed that when Adam fell, his nature became tainted and he passed this corrupt nature on to his descendants. He realized man was incapable after the Fall of generating a righteousness that would satisfy God. Augustine believed that man's choice was related to whether God chose to give grace to some and not others.

On the other hand, Pelagius (A.D. 360 – 420), influenced by his ascetic nature, believed that man could produce a righteousness that would please God. He did not believe that there was any work upon the soul by the Holy Spirit. Pelagius was not a theologian, but a moralist. He believed that predestination was God foreseeing those who would believe in His Son. Pelagianism was condemned at the Council of Ephesus in A.D. 431.

A syncretistic approach toward the subjects of the sinfulness of man, election and predestination emerged known as semi-Pelagianism. There was enough of the error of Pelagianism (i.e. that man was capable of producing a righteousness that could satisfy God's righteousness) in semi-Pelagianism to result in the condemnation at the Synod of Orange in A.D. 529.

What we haven't seen yet is any development of an answer to the question of why a God of love and righteousness would not have just caused rebellious human life to cease to exist at the point of the first sin? If man possessed a sin nature that inclined him toward sinfulness as Augustine believed, why did God leave a sinful creature to perpetuate himself? Why would God "choose" some to inherit eternal life while others perish? The answer to these questions rests with the purpose of man in the angelic conflict. The angelic conflict requires that man have freedom of volition to accept the grace gift offer of eternal life. Human history has a purpose related to that conflict, therefore any view of predestination and election must be reconciled with that purpose.

The debate over the issue of predestination and election arose as a result of theologians attempting to understand the relationship between sin (both causes and effects), God's grace, and the role of man and God in the act of salvation. To what extent was man's choice to believe related to God's choice to give grace to some and not others? Was the grace of God irresistible as Augustine seemed inclined to believe?¹

The doctrine of predestination was an essential feature of the Augustinian system and even though Pelagianism was condemned at the Council of Ephesus, the doctrine was not only rejected by some, but opposed by others. Even though Pelagianism was condemned, Augustinianism was not necessarily endorsed. Before moving out of the 5th and 6th Centuries, I must mention John Cassian and recap the highlights of the Synod of Orange in A.D. 529 to which I alluded in the last lesson.

¹ "This grace to Augustine is irresistible. God, through His grace, boasts [sic] the will, strengthens and stimulates it, so that the will itself, without any coercion, will desire the good." John D. Hannah, "The Doctrines of Salvation (Sin and Grace) – Part III: The Medieval Church" (unpublished class notes in 510 N, History of Doctrine, Dallas Theological Seminary, Spring 1999), 19.15.

John Cassian (A.D. 360 to 435) – was largely responsible for the spread of monastic life in the West (i.e. that portion of the Roman Empire that considered itself “catholic” and which largely spoke Latin).² He was an ascetic and founded two monasteries. He sought to mediate the extremes of Augustine by redefining such concepts as predestination, grace, and free will thereby making God’s actions a response to man’s initial action. He became the leader of the Massilians, a group that strenuously denied complete moral ability (i.e. Pelagianism) as well as Augustine’s complete moral inability. Thus, Cassian and the Massilians were semi-Pelagians. Cassian’s arguments can be summarized in the following points:³

- 1) Adam’s fall resulted in a corruption of nature upon his posterity, i.e. the concept of original sin
- 2) Original sin does not eliminate free will, but weakens it
- 3) The natural man is morally weakened, not morally dead (Augustine) nor morally healthy (Pelagian)
- 4) He needs divine grace as the CO-OPERATIVE agency of the human will in conversion
- 5) The MAIN share of our salvation can be ascribed to heavenly grace, not the merit of our own works
- 6) Sometimes it is divine agency which begins the work (i.e. Paul) and sometimes it is human agency which begins the work (i.e. Zacchaeus)
- 7) There is no unconditional election, i.e. God making the sovereign choice apart from man’s volition
- 8) Predestination is based upon foreknowledge and those who perish, perish against God’s will.

We can see much validity in some of Cassian’s points, e.g. original sin, no unconditional election, and the free will of man. Cassian’s semi-Pelagian views eventually came to dominate within the emerging (Roman) Catholic Church. However, the error within Cassian’s semi-Pelagian position and that of the (Roman) Catholic Church was the notion that salvation was the result of grace and works. While the (Roman) Catholic Church would adopt positions via the Synod of Orange that could really be categorized as semi-Augustinian⁴, eventually the church drifted to a Cassian position with notions of gracious ability.⁵

Synod of Orange (A.D. 529) – semi-Pelagianism was condemned at this synod as we noted last week. Semi-Pelagianism began to gain acceptance in the intellectual center of the Western church, i.e. Gaul; however, in Rome, the popes were more sympathetic to Augustine. While they ignored Augustine’s views of predestination (i.e. man’s choice is related to whether God chose to give grace to some and not others), they rejected the semi-Pelagian notion that salvation originates in man. Instead, they adopted a semi-Augustinian position that salvation originates with God, yet proceeds through efforts of God and man (e.g. He prepares our will and causes prayer to be offered for salvation).⁶ The Synod of Orange can be summarized as follows:

- 1) The need for divine grace was affirmed, but not grace as irresistible (Augustine)
- 2) Baptism is the vehicle of grace
- 3) Election to grace was recognized, but unconditional election (irresistible grace) was not mentioned

² Roland H. Bainton, *The Church of Our Fathers* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1969), 61.

³ Hannah, unpublished class notes, 20.3 – 20.4.

⁴ They were semi-Augustinian at the time of the Synod of Orange in the sense that salvation originated in God, then proceeded via God and man.

⁵ Hannah, unpublished class notes, 20.9.

⁶ In contrast, the semi-Pelagian position viewed salvation as originating with man and then proceeding by man and God.

- 4) Predestination (Augustine) was ignored if not rejected
- 5) The semi-Pelagian idea that salvation begins with man's initiative (i.e. human good works) was rejected.
- 6) A cooperative salvation from an Augustinian perspective was advocated, e.g. salvation originates with God in that God provides the grace to cause prayer to be offered for salvation and God does not wait upon our wills, but prepares our wills.
- 7) The emphasis of the Synod came to be placed upon the grace given at baptism (i.e. a sacramental grace) instead of Augustinian notions of the irresistible grace of predestination.⁷

We can see from the historical development of the church's view relating to this one topic of predestination and election that confusion was the inevitable result. It matters not whether one tries to create a fine line of distinction between whether the church was more Pelagian or Augustinian in its views at this point in the historical development of the doctrine. The fact of the matter is that the church began to adopt positions that from a practical perspective mixed man's efforts with God's grace provision to result in a works based approach to salvation. In addition, Augustinian notions of predestination and election which would eventually include the concept of irresistible grace were not refuted. "Gradually the general decline [spiritually, not prominence] in the Roman Catholic Church led to a drift in the direction of Semi-Pelagianism, which had long before secured a rather sure footing in the East. In course of time the Latin Church adopted the anthropology of the Greek Church and adhered to it ever since."⁸ In other words, eventually the Roman Catholic Church, while heavily influenced by Augustine (e.g. original sin, salvation by grace as it was defined, etc.) adopted Semi-Pelagian notions of a works oriented approach to salvation. "The Medieval Age [7th through 10th Centuries] progressively evidenced a shift from Augustinianism to a semi-Pelagianism!"⁹

Next week, we will continue to examine the historical development of this doctrine through the medieval era to the Reformation. We will see how that in spite of the fact that Augustine's views influenced church doctrine, semi-Pelagianism became the prominent force in many respects.

⁷ Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1937), 138.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 130-131.

⁹ Hannah, unpublished class notes, 20.10.