

St Augustine vs. Pelagius

Posted on September 16, 2018

Abstract

The Augustine–Pelagius controversy deals with the topics of human will, grace, and salvation. Pelagius claimed that humankind was capable of deciding between good and evil and that salvation was something a person achieves by their own choosing. Augustine claimed that humankind was a slave to sin and could not choose to do anything except what was evil. Salvation was not something a person could choose for themselves. God must first give that person grace for them to have the ability to choose what is good. The controversy did not end in the 5th century but has sprung up multiple times throughout history and continues to be an ongoing debate in Christendom today (Stump, 2001; Beck, 2007).

Introduction

In the early 5th century of the Christian church, there arose an important controversy within the church that involved two diverging figures – Pelagius, a British ascetic monk, and Augustine, most famously known as the bishop of Hippo. The controversy centers on the difference of opinion between the two diverging figures on the matter of human will. Furthermore, the relationship between the human will and the nature of sin is also a divisive topic between the two. Some questions surrounding the controversy were: Can a person choose not to sin? Is grace necessary for a person to do good? What part does a person's will play in their conversion? And is salvation initially an act by the divine or human will? While Augustine and Pelagius agreed upon certain aspects involved in answering these questions, they had considerable differences in their foundational understanding of the human will and to what extent a human can play on the road to salvation (Stump, 2001; Ferguson, 1980).

Nonetheless, Augustine and Pelagius were significant figures in the church at the beginning of the Middle Ages, and this controversy remains a milestone in the ongoing conflict surrounding the formation of Christian doctrine. This paper will discuss the positions of Augustine and Pelagius and their view of the human will with regard to salvation. Two specific works of these theologians will be compared to give an understanding of their respective positions and beliefs: Augustine's *The Spirit and the Letter* and Pelagius' *Letter to Demetrius*.

Pelagius

While living in Rome, Pelagius was actively involved in imparting the Christian faith and calling the Christians of the time to follow the correct teachings of Christianity and stay away from the vices of

the world. His teachings were aimed at pointing out godly conduct versus evil conduct. As a monk, Pelagius was a strong proponent of a rigorous lifestyle, and therefore, he was highly devoted to controlling his personal conduct and doing only those things that were good to do. The controversy could be said to have first sprouted when Pelagius read a certain prayer of Augustine: “Oh God, grant what Thou commandest, and command what Thou dost will.”¹ Pelagius did not agree with Augustine, and he became passionate about speaking out against such a notion (Ferguson, 1980; Beck, 2007).

As a pious and ascetic monk, Pelagius believed that the Christian life consisted of a continued struggle with oneself to overcome worldly pleasures. He contended that attaining salvation did not rest with God but with one’s own ability. Salvation could be achieved depending on one’s commitment to overcoming sin and choosing good over evil. Thus, Augustine’s prayer seemed like it undermined the Christian understanding of the human will and the role of personal choice in pursuing salvation. In other words, Pelagius saw Augustine’s affirmation for God to grant what he commands as an overriding of human volition to choose to do what God commands. It is helpful to understand Pelagius’ position by knowing that his philosophical tendencies and worldview were derived from Origen and the idea of the perfectibility of the soul (Ferguson, 1980; Beck, 2007).

In Pelagius’ reckoning, within each person is a determinate will that is free to do that which it desires. Thus, to Pelagius, what mattered was his freedom to choose good and the marvelous virtues with which God had endowed him, sometimes buried deep but waiting to be unearthed. In his Letter to Demetrias, Pelagius conveys to Demetrius, who was a wealthy and pious woman, how it is insensible to think that God has asked anything of humankind with which it is impossible for a person to comply. Pelagius asserted that for God “to call a person to something he considers impossible does him [the person] no good.”³ He also concluded along this line of reasoning that if God’s commandments were too heavy to bear, then it must be that God has been seeking not so much humankind’s salvation but apparently their condemnation (Ferguson, 1980).

According to Pelagius, it cannot be that God has asked humankind for something which they cannot possibly fulfill. Pelagius’ argument is that God’s commandments have to be performable. Otherwise, why would God ask us to do things which cannot be done? In Pelagius’ perspective, every person has a direct and active role in choosing what they will do – whether good or bad. A person’s behavior is a result of their deliberate decisions to act in certain ways (Ferguson, 1980; Beck, 2007).

Augustine

On the other side of the controversy is a theologian and philosopher contemporary with Pelagius named Augustine. Augustine came from a Manichaean background, which looked at the world through a very different lens than Pelagius. For him, everything in the world is bad. These bad events or actions have been predetermined by God. Humans do not have the power to change these events. Only God can change these events, as humans are powerless against the forces of God. According to Augustine’s thinking, his conversion to Christianity was not because of his free will. On the contrary,

he felt that it was God who had selected this path for him. He believed that he had been saved by “irresistible divine grace from sins which he could never have overcome by his own strength.” Augustine’s view of the human condition was one of permanence, unable to be altered without divine intervention. To Augustine, humankind was bound and shackled by the power of sin, which utterly dominated the human will, forcing a person to do what was evil (Stump, 2001).

Humanity was in bondage and stuck in a pit from which it could not escape. Sin had infested every part of the human race and continually prevented any effort to do good. So then, how can a person be saved if their will is unmatched by their ability? In other words, how can a person receive salvation if they are unable to do anything good even though they want to? For Augustine, salvation cannot be by free will choice alone because free choice avails only sin.¹⁶ While a person may believe because they will in themselves to do so, their faith is in their power because it is a willing act. It is the human will consenting to God’s call, which Augustine argues is the act of acceptance whereby a person can receive God’s gift of salvation. This gift enables a person to delight in God and experience his love, which is “that supreme and changeless Good,” as he describes it (Stump, 2001).

Upon receiving the gift of grace, a person can perform good works and loving acts. Therefore, since humans are incapable of doing any good as part of a saving act, all power to do good must, of necessity, come from God, who bestows this gift. Furthermore, according to Augustine, a person’s role in salvation is then one of inclination of the will to be saved and then reception of God’s gracious gift whereby they become infused with a heavenly power that swells up in them so that they love righteousness and can overcome sinful desires. The human will is divinely assisted by the grace that comes through the work of Christ, enabling a person to keep the “Christian life” (Stump, 2001).

Christ was the agent that reversed the curse of Adam’s sin, which Augustine saw as the sickness that ails every person in the world. People are born already doomed to failure because of sin, and they are completely depraved (corrupted) to change that condition. Only through the work of Christ has grace become available to overpower sin and offer salvation to those to whom God chooses to offer salvation. Therefore, salvation is not a choice humankind can make. A person is chosen to receive grace leading to salvation by the will of God alone (Couenhoven, 2005; William, 2001).

In [Augustine’s view](#), salvation comes only to those who are given this “grace” by God to triumph over sin in their lives. Without this grace, a person could do good, but it would never happen. However, in order to receive this special grace, a person must first believe, and this belief is their mental consent, an act of their will. However, their willingness does not constitute salvific power in the sense that a person can be saved, and it is accomplished apart from God’s prior intervention. For Augustine, grace was an indispensable and necessary aid in the salvation that God chooses to give a person to overcome sin and be saved. The main work of grace in the life of a person who wills to be saved is the indwelling love of God that gradually transforms their character (Stump, 2001; Couenhoven, 2005).

Augustine's Victory

Using letters from Paul, Augustine was able to refute Pelagius. Augustine contended that Adam committed a sin and that it could not be considered a private affair. Adam is to be considered the representative of all men. Therefore, when Adam fell from heaven, symbolically, all mankind fell with him. Hence, all mankind is born with this inherent weakness, which Augustine called pride. We are born with the same guilt as Adam and cannot shake it off no matter how hard we try. In simpler terms, Augustine meant to say that men are born sinful and are unable to respond to the teachings of God. It is up to God to select which people to save from the fire and which people to condemn. By saving the people from fire, God is effectively giving them the gift of faith. He showers His blessings upon them and exalts them in the eyes of ordinary people (Couenhoven, 2005; William, 2001).

By generating complete dependence on God for almost every aspect of life, including salvation, Augustine was able to inspire a great number of people. Moreover, he was convinced in his belief that his system of beliefs was the only way people could be set on the right path once again. For him, the only way to rid society of the immoral culture at the time was to turn toward God. His prayer, "Command what you will: Give what you command," is a true reflection of his beliefs (Stump, 2001).

Augustine is said to have won this theological debate as the majority of his teachings are still being followed and practiced by the Church of Rome and much of Christianity. At the Council of Carthage and Council of Ephesus, Pelagius and his teachings were condemned. The members of both councils asserted Augustine's view. Therefore, we can conclude that Augustine emerged as the victor over Pelagius. Moreover, Augustine's teachings have stood the test of time, making them more famous (Beck, 2007; Ferguson, 1980).

Conclusion

The Augustine-Pelagius controversy did not end with Pelagius's persecution and death but spilled over to later centuries as well. In the 16th century, the world again witnessed a debate between noted theologians Martin Luther and Desiderius Erasmus, the roots of which lie in the Augustine-Pelagius controversy. In the 17th century, the same controversy served as the instigator of the animosity between John Calvin and Jacobus Arminius. This issue has not been resolved and continues to divide Christians even today. There is no end in sight to this controversy, as there will always be a difference of opinion (Beck, 2007).

Works Cited

- Stump, Eleonore. "Augustine on free will." *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine* (2001): 124-47.
- William, E. "Augustine on evil and original sin." *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine* 40 (2001).

Beck, John H. "The Pelagian Controversy: An Economic Analysis." *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 66, no. 4 (2007): 681-696.

Ferguson, John. "In Defence of Pelagius." *Theology* 83, no. 692 (1980): 114-119.

Couenhoven, Jesse. "St. Augustine's doctrine of original sin." *Augustinian Studies* 36, no. 2 (2005): 359-396.