



Prayer Before Studying Theology:

ALMIGHTY Father, who hast given thine only Son to die for our sins, and to rise again for our justification; Grant us so to put away the leaven of malice and wickedness, that we may always serve thee in pureness of living and truth; through the merits of the same, thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

--Book of Common Prayer (1928), First Sunday After Easter

Week #3a: The Background and Origins of the Pelagian Controversy

Pelagius' Origins: Pelagius was born in Britain but moved to Rome around 380, possibly to study law. While there he adopted the ascetic life and became known for his biblical exposition and teaching about the Christian life, particularly among those members of the aristocracy who were interested in pursuing Christian perfection through a life of prayer and ascetic disciplines. Although described as a *monachus* (monk) and *servus Dei* (servant of God), it is likely that he was simply a layman who adopted a private discipline of asceticism.

Pelagius' Influences: Because asceticism had first come to prominence in the Greek-speaking eastern empire, Pelagius was inspired by a number of Greek-speaking contemporary writers who had had some connection with the ascetic movement. John Chrysostom had a particularly strong influence on his biblical exposition and views of the ascetic life. Although these Greek ascetical ideals had considerable influence in Rome and southern France, North Africa had a different background and made different assumptions about some practices basic to the Christian life. As Christians in different parts of the empire moved about and publicly communicated and systematized their varying beliefs, conflicts were inevitable.

Two Previously Existing Theological Questions Which Are Relevant to the Origin of the Pelagian Controversy:

- What is the Source of the Bodily Evils That We Experience in This Life?
- How Are Conversion, Regeneration and Baptism Related to The Evils and Disorder We Find Within Ourselves?

One matter on which there was broad agreement in early Christianity (referring back to Paul's letters, esp. Romans) was that *our present life in the body is afflicted by a certain disorder and certain evils that are the result of sin.*

- Thus, for example, our bodies deteriorate and die (a physical/bodily evil), which is surely not part of God's original, good design for human life.
- Similarly, we initially find ourselves subject to desires that are sometimes disordered, excessive and out of control (think of being strongly moved by anger or lust). Again, this disorder within our desires and our consequent motivation to

act immoderately and improperly (a strong incitement to moral evil) cannot be part of God's original, good design for human lives, so must be the result of sin. The only solution to sin and its corrupting effects upon body and soul, it was agreed, was faith in Christ and consequent regeneration/baptism (cf. Tit. 3:5 for the unity and coincidence of regeneration and baptism in early Christian thought).

The problem comes in saying precisely

- a. how sin is the cause of bodily evils and
- b. how and to what extent baptism/regeneration cleanses one from sin and its effects.

What Prior Sin is the Reason for the Bodily Evils We Suffer?

In regard to (a), when we say that sin is the cause of the bodily evils one suffers (e.g. death), what sort of sin are we talking about? The sins one has committed oneself? If so,

- (1) how would we account for the suffering of infants who die at or shortly after childbirth? What kind of sin could they possibly have committed?
- (2) why would infants be baptized into Christ for the remission of their sins, unless there was in fact a taint of sin attaching to them, from which they needed to be healed?

Notice that this argument presumes the existence of infant baptism in the church as a given and something that needs to be explained. The practice of infant baptism had existed as a common practice at Alexandria in Egypt from at least the first half of the second century A.D. (if not earlier) and in North Africa from at least the second half of the second century A.D. (if not earlier). The practice was assumed to go back to the apostolic era (cf. the household baptisms in Acts and the Pauline Epistles) but did not have a clear, systematic theological rationale.

If the sin that is the cause of the bodily evils one suffers is not one's own sin (i.e. not sin one has previously committed in this life), then whose sin is it? There would appear to be two possibilities here:

- We could imagine that souls are brought into existence before their earthly bodies are made and that the soul has some sort of life elsewhere, in which it sins, before it is joined to a heavier, grosser earthly body and forced to descend to live in this lower, less ordered world (normally as a consequence of the sin[s] committed in its previous existence). This is the solution canvassed by Plato in the *Republic* and *Meno* and is considered a speculative possibility by Christian Platonists in the Greek East during the third and fourth centuries A.D. (Origen, Didymus the Blind, Evagrius, etc.)
- We could assume that, insofar as the human race has a certain unity and all of its members derive their existence from an original first couple, the effects of Adam's sin affect us as his descendants. Thus, the sentence of death announced to Adam if he transgressed the commandment ("If you eat of the fruit of the tree, you shall surely die") affected not only Adam but all his descendants. Compare Rom. 5:12a; 6:23a: "Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men...For the wages of sin is death..." Compare also
 - Rom. 5:15b ("For if many died by the trespass of the one man...");

- Rom. 5:17a ("For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man...");
- Rom. 5:18a ("...just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men...");
- 1 Cor. 15:21-22: "For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive."

This belief that we have become subject to the penalty of mortality/death as a result of Adam's sin was widely held in both the Greek East and the Latin West on the basis of Rom. 5:12ff.

Even John Chrysostom, writing on Rom. 5:19 (in Bradley Nassif, "Toward a 'Catholic' Understanding of St. Augustine's View of Original Sin," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 39:4 (1984), pp. 287-299) admits:

"'Through the wrongdoing of one man many became sinners.' That, when Adam sinned and became mortal, those who were descended from him should also become mortal also has nothing improbable about it."

What/Whose Sin is the Source of Inward Attraction/Enticement to Moral Evils?

Going beyond our liability to death, there are, however, some further questions which might be asked:

- Why are our desires so disordered that we see evil things as good and desirable and want to pursue them?
- Why are these distorted desires and attitudes observable in us even from an early age?
- When one is baptized and takes up the life of faith and its disciplines, to what extent is one's inner life freed from the power and appeal of sin?

Writers in the Greek East and Latin West returned a variety of differing answers to these questions and these differences led to the Pelagian controversy.

Augustine, basing himself upon the Wisdom literature and St. Paul's Epistles, argues that there is a *taint of sin* that attaches to each one of us even from birth (Ps. 51:5: "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me") and is common to all people (Prov. 20:9: "Who can say, 'I have kept my heart pure; I am clean without sin?'"), This is the *result of God's judgment against Adam's sin* (which also affects Adam's descendants) and *involves not just mortality/liability to death, but also a disorder in one's inner life*, so that one's desires often reveal

- a. a perverse aversion to the Creator and the law/moral order which the Creator has established (see Rom. 7:8,10-11) and
- b. a turning toward inferior things, hoping that they may be and supply things that only the Creator can be and supply (compare Rom. 1:21-25).

There is thus within each one of us a sinful nature that seeks to gratify its own desires, cravings and lusts, rejecting every other authority (Eph. 2:3; 2 Pet. 2:10,18; Gal. 5:16-17; Rom. 7:8).

- Before our union with Christ in baptism, this sinful nature controls us (Rom. 7:5), so that we are slaves to the law of sin (Rom. 7:25), powerless to help ourselves

(Rom. 5:6), so that even when we desire to do the good, we find ourselves unable to do it (Rom. 7:18-20).

- Salvation is thus all of grace, owing nothing to human effort (Rom. 3:24; 11:6; Eph. 2:5,8) but being rooted in God's prior choice (election/predestination) (Rom. 8:29-30; 9:11; Eph. 1:5,11).

What Augustine contributes to this Pauline synthesis are novel theories (not held in the Greek East) about

- 1) how the taint of sin is transmitted from Adam and his descendants and
- 2) how the nature of this taint of sin should be understood.

In regard to (1), Augustine, while admitting his uncertainty, suggests that souls have a quasi-material nature and that the soul of the child is formed from a portion of the soul of the parent (father), so that defects/stains affecting the parent's soul will be passed on to the child's soul.

- This theory of the origin of the soul is called "traducianism"; a cruder version of this theory, involving a more explicitly corporeal transmission of the soul, can be found in the earlier Latin writer Tertullian *De anima* 37.5-7 but is explicitly rejected by Augustine in *Gn. litt.* 10.25.41-10.26.45.

In regard to (2), Augustine argues that in receiving this taint, the guilt of Adam's sin attaches to us. What Augustine means by "guilt" (*reatus*) here is that

- (a) there is a moral debt (*debitum*) of honor to God that is
 - owed to God but
 - has remained unpaid due to Adam's transgression and
 - for which we ourselves are unable to provide satisfaction, since we ourselves have fallen away from God and often fail to honor God as we ought;
- (b) there is a loss of wisdom that accompanied and is the consequence of Adam's transgression, so that we are often moved to act blindly in accordance with our desires; we are, however, culpable for having lost and failing to possess or exercise the wisdom which God originally gave to us.