



A Biblical and Doctrinal Study on the Concept of Original Sin

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The Free Will Defense by Pelagius

(Charges 7-12 of 12) (Part 2)

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This lesson continues with the defense of Pelagius to the Council of Diospolis (Palestine Synod Council). Recall that we are taking this journey to learn the development of the doctrine of original sin that was established by Augustine. This doctrine did not come out of thin air; rather, it was fully developed by Augustine to maintain authority of the Church when Pelagius and some of his followers challenged them. Without Pelagius, there would have been less need to address this issue since the Church was well-prepared to handle the salvation of all their converts through the traditional confessional order of their religion.

We've learned that the debate between free will to sin vs. original sin giving believers absolutely no choice in the matter was not so much a debate in search of the Truth, but a debate to establish supremacy of authority. Sadly, because the search for Truth seems often neglected in the discussion, present-day ideas tangled up in belief might be founded on less truth and more politics.

The purpose of this entire Bible Study is to find out for ourselves the Truth of God in this matter. We must try to remove our presuppositions as much as we are able as we take the journey to search and discover the path of God. At this point in our study, we are looking at the first inquisition between Pelagius and the Council of Diospolis (Eastern Church). That in the end Pelagius was declared not guilty of the charges brought against him, and supported by the

Council gave Augustine reason to record the event in order to argue against it to the Western Church. Thus, the only record we have of the Council's questioning of Pelagius comes from the writings of Augustine to Bishop Aurelius of Carthage, later published as "A Work on the Proceedings of Pelagius."

It is that writing that we are presently analyzing, to determine the truth of Pelagius' belief without the politics required to seize the power and maintain it for the church. To this point, we have examined 1-6 of 12 Pelagius defenses to the Palestine Synod Council:

Recap of 1-6 of 12 Pelagius Defenses in front of the Palestine Synod Council

1. There are no human beings capable of being free of sin unless they know the Law of God. It is through the knowledge of the law that humans are assisted towards not sinning.
2. All human beings are able to rule their free will and submit to their own desires; but, God is their helper only whenever a choice for good is made. Those committing sin are under the direction of free will alone, and not under the direction of God.
3. Sinning human beings will be sentenced to hell on the Day of Judgment as a result of the eternal, everlasting, punishment by God. Righteous human beings will receive eternal reward in heaven by God. Rather than define the Day of Judgment defendants as Christians or seculars, Pelagius argues for the literal representation of human being actions as either directed by God to righteousness, or directed by their own free wills to sin, to predict their eternal destinations of punishments or rewards adjudicated by the Lord.
4. Christians must be careful not to have evil thoughts to maintain their righteousness and holiness that is directed by God.
5. The fact that righteous saints will receive the Kingdom of God is clearly stated by both the Old Testament Prophets and the New Testament Gospels.
6. Human beings are able to be without sin with God's grace and help directing them. When human beings are converted to righteousness through their faithful walk with Christ, they are able to also go without sin by their own free will exertion as their life journey is directed by God.

Let us proceed with our examination of charges 7-12 and the defense that Pelagius makes for each.

Seventh charge involves various statements made by Pelagius' disciple Cœlestius¹

One telling clue to the truth of teachings is to examine their fruits. Pelagius taught his convictions, and his disciples carried those teachings to deeper places. The most notable of his students was Cœlestius who maintains Pelagius doctrine of free will to sin, and adds his own spin in presenting this belief in dramatic fashion that leads to the need of the Church to examine the foundation of his teacher's belief. Thus, the declarations of Cœlestius were grouped together and formed the basis for which Pelagius was questioned in the seventh charge.

Specifically, (according to Augustine) Cœlestius has in the past declared²:

1. "Adam was created mortal, and would have died whether he had sinned or not sinned"
2. "Adam's sin injured only himself and not the human race"
3. "That the law no less than the gospel leads us to the kingdom"
4. "That there were sinless men previous to the coming of Christ"
5. "That newborn infants are in the same condition as Adam was before the fall"
6. "That the whole human race does not die through Adam's death or transgression"

¹ Saint Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, *"A Work on the Proceedings of Pelagius"*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans., Peter Holmes, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, vol. V: Saint Augustine: Anti-Pelagian Writings (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1887), 193-195.

² The seventh charge addresses the declarations of student Cœlestius; but, it should be noted that Augustine's account moves from presenting a record of the issues debated in the Council, to his memory of some of the ideas that Cœlestius has declared. It seems Augustine makes an assumption that these specific ideas that have become representative of Pelagius' students were all grouped together into the seventh charge in which Pelagius was required to defend.

7. "The whole human race does not rise again through the resurrection of Christ"³

Augustine speaks of the condemnation already declared by the bishops at Carthage against the ideas of Cœlestius, to Bishop Aurelius in his letter with a focus on the points that distress him most. But his defense and charges against free will sin are for the next lesson. We'll skip past those points, and examine the charges against Pelagius and his answers to the Synod.

Synod charges: It is assumed from Augustine's letter that the Synod discussed the various beliefs of Pelagius' disciples that have originated from his teachings.

Pelagius' defense: Rather than declare his full agreement to all that has been said by his disciples, he rewords his belief to correct any misperceptions:

"Concerning a man's being able indeed to be without sin, we have spoken already; concerning the fact, however, that before the Lord's coming there were persons without sin, we say now that, previous to Christ's advent, some men lived holy and righteous lives, according to the teaching of the sacred Scriptures. The rest were not said by me, as even their testimony goes to show, and for them, I do not feel that I am responsible. But for the satisfaction of the holy synod, I anathematize those who either now hold, or have ever held, these opinions."⁴

Pelagius seems to back away from solid declaration that it is possible for human beings to live fully without sin; his explanations earlier credit the need for God's full participation in a human's life if it is to be lived without sin. He reduces the "sinless" condition to "holy" and "righteous" living, and that is indeed, supported by Scripture prior to Christ's arrival. Most

³ Augustine, 193.

⁴ *ibid.*

importantly, he separates his belief and denounces statements made by any of his disciples that moves the idea of free will to sin away from truthful representation of Scriptures.

Synod decision: Once they heard Pelagius separate his belief from those apostates who developed the pernicious belief that conflicts with the truth of Scriptures, the synod said “With regard to these charges aforesaid, Pelagius has in our presence given us sufficient and proper satisfaction, by anathematizing the opinions which were not his. “

Eighth charge addresses Pelagius statement about the purity of the Church

Synod charges: The Synod charges Pelagius that he stated “That the Church here is without spot or wrinkle” that conflicts with Scripture that states, “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8).

Pelagius’ defense: “It has been asserted by me, - but in such a sense that the Church is cleansed from every spot and wrinkle, and in this purity the Lord wishes her to continue.”⁵

Synod decision: The Synod agrees with Pelagius’ assertion that the Church is in the process of removing sin which will result in a sinless state at some point, and will exist forever.

Ninth charge accuses Pelagius of holding the underlying unwritten views of Cœlestius

Synod charges: The next charge dealt with the book written by Cœlestius with a focus upon the underlying thoughts, rather than the actual words. Specifically, they addressed the idea that Cœlestius taught that more should be done than is commanded by the law or the gospel.

Pelagius’ defense: Pelagius acknowledged the reading of the book, and surmised that Cœlestius was speaking about the idea of virginity in the sense that the state of virginity is not

⁵ Ibid., 195.

commanded by God's law, but it is something more than conjugal chastity which is specifically commanded. Pelagius then spoke his own understanding that the possession of free will allows a believer to avoid sin at a level that is above that which is just commanded.⁶

Synod decision: The Synod was forced to acknowledge agreement with this idea, since their state of virginity expectations for their most holy agents would be placed in jeopardy. They closed this line of questioning quickly, and neither Pelagius' or Cœlestius' view on the matter of virginity was examined any further.⁷

Tenth item addresses more points contained in Cœlestius' work

Synod charges: Cœlestius allegedly writes "That God's grace and assistance is not given for single actions, but is imparted in the freedom of the will, or in the law and in doctrine" and "That God's grace is given in proportion to our deserts; because, were He to give it to sinful persons, He would seem to be unrighteous."⁸ The Synod charges Pelagius to address Cœlestius' stance that the Grace of God is placed in a person, and that person has the free will to either be worthy or unworthy of the gift.

Pelagius' defense: Pelagius replies that he does not know whether this is a true representation of Cœlestius' belief; but, he denies that he ever entertained such views: "...I anathematize everyone who does entertain them."⁹

Synod decision: The holy gathering of Synod judges accepts Pelagius' condemnation of Cœlestius' words.

Eleventh item of accusation addresses Cœlestius' of power given to humans by God

⁶ Ibid., 196.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

Synod charges: The Synod examines Cœlestius' fifth chapter in his book states that every individual is given the ability to "possess all powers and graces, thus taking away that 'diversity of graces' which the apostle teaches." They question Pelagius concerning his views on this matter.

Pelagius defense: Pelagius defends this in a clever way of stating that the Apostle Paul had all powers and graces upon him; thus, the condition exists for everyone. This created a great deal of discussion, argument, and witness testimony; Pelagius remains silent during this, and his failure to respond seems to suggest his support of Cœlestius' teaching concerning the power bestowed upon humans by God.¹⁰

Synod decision: The judges approve Pelagius defense.

Twelfth Accusation addresses Cœlestius' doctrine concerning men becoming sons of God

Synod charges: The synod read to Pelagius from the sixth chapter of Cœlestius' work his statement "Men cannot be called sons of God, unless they have become entirely free from all sin" and his seventh chapter statement, "Forgetfulness and ignorance have no connection with sin, as they do not happen through the will, but through necessity." The judges read from the tenth chapter "Our will is free, if it needs the help of God; inasmuch as everyone in the possession of his proper will has either something to do or to abstain from doing," and from the twelfth chapter the statement "Our victory comes not from God's help, but from our own free will." They also read the conclusion of Cœlestius "Now if our spirit or soul is unable to be without sin, then even God is subject to sin, since this part of Him, that is to say, the soul, is

¹⁰ It is this eleventh charge that stirs the synod judges deeper questioning, and later, Augustine's detailed anxiousness of heresy's that Pelagius' position possibly supports. These detailed arguments will be addressed in our deeper study of defense 11.

exposed to sin and from the thirteenth chapter “That pardon is not given to penitents according to the grace and mercy of God, but according to their own merits and effort, since through repentance they have been worthy of mercy.”¹¹

Pelagius defense: Monk Pelagius was asked by the Synod how he responds to the various readings of quotations made by Cœlestius from his work that is blatantly condemned by both the synod and God’s Holy Catholic Church. He replies, “I say again, that these opinions, even according to their own testimony, are not mine; nor for them, as I have already said, ought I to be held responsible. The opinions which I have confessed to be my own, I maintain are sound; those, however, which I have said are not my own, I reject according to the judgment of this holy synod, pronouncing anathema on every man who opposes and gainsays the doctrines of the Holy Catholic Church; for I believe in the Trinity of the one substance, and I hold all things in accordance with the teaching of the Holy Catholic Church. If indeed any man entertains opinions different from her, let him be anathema.”¹²

Synod decision: Pelagius’ was acquitted of all charges for his defenses of belief and declarations of heresy against those beliefs that he did not share.

Conclusion of Lesson 4

The first volley of arguments against Pelagius’ defense was quickly fired by Augustine, who provided this account of the synod’s inquisition. Augustine inserted his beliefs and arguments against Pelagius as he reported the synod proceedings.

Recap of all 12 Pelagius Defenses in front of the Palestine Synod Council

¹¹ Augustine, 202.

¹² Ibid.

1. There are no human beings capable of being free of sin unless they know the Law of God. It is through the knowledge of the law that humans are assisted towards not sinning.
2. All human beings are able to rule their free will and submit to their own desires; but, God is their helper only whenever a choice for good is made. Those committing sin are under the direction of free will alone, and not under the direction of God.
3. Sinning human beings will be sentenced to hell on the Day of Judgment as a result of the eternal, everlasting, punishment by God. Righteous human beings will receive eternal reward in heaven by God. Rather than define the Day of Judgment defendants as Christians or seculars, Pelagius argues for the literal representation of human being actions as either directed by God to righteousness, or directed by their own free wills to sin, to predict their eternal destinations of punishments or rewards adjudicated by the Lord.
4. Christians must be careful not to have evil thoughts to maintain their righteousness and holiness that is directed by God.
5. The fact that righteous saints will receive the Kingdom of God is clearly stated by both the Old Testament Prophets and the New Testament Gospels.
6. Human beings are able to be without sin with God's grace and help directing them. When human beings are converted to righteousness through their faithful walk with Christ, they are able to also go without sin by their own free will exertion as their life journey is directed by God.
7. It is impossible that human beings can live without sin without the help of God. It is the God's full participation in a human's life that allows this condition of sinlessness to exist within a human. Some humans living before Christ's sacrifice were able to maintain holy and righteous living without sin through God's support.
8. The Church is in the process of removing sin which will result in a sinless state at some point, and will exist forever.
9. The possession of free will allows a believer to avoid sin at a level that is above that which is just commanded
10. The grace of God is bestowed upon individuals rather than given to all humans who choose with their free will whether to be worthy or unworthy of the gift.

11. The Apostle Paul had all of God's powers and graces bestowed upon him; thus, it can be concluded that all humans have God's powers and graces within them also.

12. Free will does not choose to make a human being sinless or to sin; but, it is the grace of God working within man that gives power against the sinful nature of man.

In Lesson 5, we will examine each of the defenses the Pelagius offers, and Augustine's refutation of these defenses, and Scriptural support to enlighten us further, with hopes that we can further narrow down the issues that foster belief in either original sin, or the free will alone that causes sin.

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