

The History of the Doctrine of Justification...



How
Christ
preserved
the good
news in
history

The Work of Christ Augustine. The Doctor of Grace

What we have seen thus far is that there are two great fronts on which the church has battled to keep its identity. There are two great issues that have kept coming up over and over again in the history of the church. Those two great issues are:

1. Who was Christ?
2. What did He accomplish on behalf of His people?

Some of the more able church historians and theologians like B.B. Warfield have said that the fight for orthodoxy concerned the objective and subjective aspects of the Christ's incarnation. By that he meant, "What has Christ done in history, and how does it apply to our standing before God both in the present and in the future?" But what we have tried to do in this study is to keep our examination of church history simple. And in trying to keep it simple, something which we have not always accomplished, we have examined the biggest conflicts, the biggest issues, the great fights of early Christianity under one of the two rubrics:

1. Who was Christ?
2. What did He accomplish on behalf of His people?

Last time together, we looked at Pelagius and his devastating theology. If we were to ask Pelagius, “What did Christ accomplish on behalf of His people?” His answer, if you could have gotten him to answer, would have had to have been, “Christ accomplished precious little for His people.” But Pelagius was slippery. If I may say it plainly, Pelagius was deceitful. He was originally concerned about morality, and in his concern to push the quest for heightened morality or increased spirituality he wound up denying both man’s sinful state and God’s gracious work in Christ. Christ wound up being a moral example to follow rather than a Savior, who redeemed His people from their sin.

I like the way B.B. Warfield summarizes Pelagian teaching.

The real question at issue was whether there was any need for Christianity at all; whether by his own power man might not attain eternal felicity; whether the function of Christianity was to save, or only to render an eternity of happiness more easily attainable by man.

B.B. Warfield

Pelagius’ logic followed a very simple line. If I could illustrate his views by means of a simple conversation between a sinner and Pelagius, it would go like this.

Sinner: Pelagius, I see all the commands of God. They terrify me. Because I am unable to keep them.

Pelagius: My son. You can keep the commands of God. For you to say that you cannot, is to question God’s goodness. God made you pure and holy, otherwise,

you can see can't you, that you are calling God evil. The fact that God gave us commands to keep means that we are able to keep them.

Sinner: Well, of course, God is good, that goes without saying. But I thought when Father Adam sinned it affected me, and that negatively.

Pelagius: Adam's sin affected you only in providing a poor example. Each and every child that comes into the world is in the same state as Adam. The only reason children sin is because mankind has developed a serious habit of sinning, but if we apply ourselves to live righteously, we can.

Sinner: But Pelagius, I know I have already sinned. Doesn't that mean that I have become a sinner. Whether Adam affected me or not, I know that I personally have sinned.

Pelagius: Ah, now I see the problem. You think that you have been affected inwardly. That somehow, inside, you have fallen. But that is not the case. Sin exists only in those outward things you do. To stop being a sinner, all you have to do, is stop sinning.

Sinner: I'm not so sure that that really helps all that much. I was thinking of throwing myself on God's mercy. I mean didn't the Father send Christ to atone for our sins.

Pelagius: Ah, again you are trying to shift the responsibility to another. First. You wanted to make Adam responsible for your sin, now you want to make Christ responsible for your salvation. Don't you see, my son, that your salvation is really in the end, up to you. Doesn't your heart tell you that there is something you must do to earn God's favor. You simply need to make use of the instruments of God's grace.

Sinner: You know, I like that word "grace". But how do I make use of God's grace. I thought grace meant God's kindness toward me. I thought He showed His grace to sinners, and forgave them, and they responded to His kindness in faith and love.

Pelagius: No, no, my son. Grace is not inward. It does not change you in any sense. It does not give you the ability to believe or obey. Grace is about God's outward influences upon you. He can use His law, or His gospel, or another person's example, or any outward circumstance to encourage you to do your

duty. But grace is not inward, God cannot intervene in your heart. To intervene in your heart would mean that He is violating your free will and God cannot do that, He is, after all, a gentleman.

So we see the following tenants of Pelagius' theology.

1. Ought implies can. If God commands it, we can do it.
2. We are not effected by original sin.
3. We have picked up the habit of sin, not a sin nature.
4. We do not become sinners when we sin.
5. Christ provides a moral example and encouragement to stop sinning, and that saves us.
6. Grace is outward, never inward, or it would violate our free will.

It was into this fray, that Augustine, the "Doctor of Grace", entered early in the fifth century. But by the time the Pelagian controversy came on the scene, Augustine had already become an old hand at controversy. He had already been involved in three major controversies.

First, he had already fought it out with the Manicheans, a philosophical group that taught there are really two Gods, one good and one evil. They also taught that man is helpless as an instrument of fate, and as a result morality of any kind is just a sham. Augustine had, in fact, been a part of their cult for many years as a young man. He liked the intellectual nature of their philosophy. He also liked their immorality. During his youth and as a Manichean, Augustine was entrenched in immorality. He had a mistress for over fifteen years and fathered an illegitimate son. After he was converted, he put away his immoral lifestyle, and his mistress, but he kept and raised his son. He studied the Scriptures with a passion and he rapidly grew in the faith. When he became the Bishop of Hippo, in northern Africa, he immediately set out to expose Manicheanism for the

reprobate philosophy that it was. He wrote about his own struggle with Manicheanism and his deliverance from it by God. The book is called The Confessions of Augustine. It is a wonderful little book. Augustine reveals much of his own life, so in a sense it is a marvelous autobiographical work. But it is much more than that. It is, at its heart, a tract on the grace of God. I think it is probably one of the ten great Christian books ever written.

Listen to the famous introduction:

GREAT art Thou, O Lord, and greatly to be praised; great is Thy power, and of Thy wisdom there is no end. And man, being a part of Thy creation, desires to praise Thee, man, who bears about with him his mortality, the witness of his sin, even the witness that Thou “resistest the proud,” — yet man, this part of Thy creation, desires to praise Thee. Thou movest us to delight in praising Thee; for Thou hast formed us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in Thee.

In this wonderful little book, Augustine describes his own wicked heart. He in an act of humility tells the truth. He was unencumbered by fear of what people thought. He was amazed at God’s grace. One of my favorite stories is the one that Augustine tells about he and some other young thugs stealing pears from a neighbor’s tree. It was not because they were better pears that what Augustine had in his own yard, it was because they were forbidden. Listen to how he puts it.

Nor did I desire to enjoy what I pilfered, but the theft and sin itself. There was a pear-tree close to our vineyard, heavily laden with fruit, which was tempting neither for its color nor its flavor. To shake and rob this some of us wanton young fellows went, late one night (having, according to our disgraceful habit, prolonged our games in the streets until then), and carried away great loads, not

to eat ourselves, but to fling to the very swine, having only eaten some of them; and to do this pleased us all the more because it was not permitted. Behold my heart, O my God; behold my heart, which Thou hadst pity upon when in the bottomless pit.

He later relates the famous garden scene where he was converted. He had been in the deepest depression, brought on by a consideration of his sinful life. Suddenly, he heard a group of children playing a game. One of the children began to chant, "Tole lege, tole lege." Listen to how Augustine describes it.

I was saying these things and weeping in the most bitter contrition of my heart, when, lo, I heard the voice as of a boy or girl, I know not which, coming from a neighboring house, chanting, and oft repeating, "Take up and read; take up and read." Immediately my countenance was changed, and I began most earnestly to consider whether it was usual for children in any kind of game to sing such words; nor could I remember ever to have heard the like. So, restraining the torrent of my tears, I rose up, interpreting it no other way than as a command to me from Heaven to open the book, and to read the first chapter I should light upon...So quickly I returned to the place where Alypius was sitting; for there had I put down the volume of the apostles, when I rose thence. I grasped, opened, and in silence read that paragraph on which my eyes first fell, — "Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying; but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfill the lusts thereof." No further would I read, nor did I need; for instantly, as the sentence ended, — by a light, as it were, of security infused into my heart, — all the gloom of doubt vanished away.

The Confessions of Augustine is a remarkable book. It is one those books filled with theology and because it is filled with theology it is remarkable as a book of devotion. In it Augustine relates his move from Manicheanism to grace. But not only was Augustine involved in the Manichean controversy, he was also involved in a battle called the Donatist Controversy. The Donatist were purists. Earlier in the church under Diocletian, there had been desperate persecution.

Some ministers had fled to avoid persecution. Others gave up their Bibles, something which was unspeakable in those days because there were so few copies of Holy Scripture. The Donatists argued that any ministers who fled persecution should be excommunicated. Whether that argument was fair or not, however, was not the central point in the debate in the Donatist controversy. The Donatists argued that if a minister had deserted his post whatever ministry he had accomplished was also rendered invalid. That meant, of course, that if you were converted under the ministry of a minister who fled persecution, your conversion was no longer valid. If you had been baptized, or married by such a minister those things were also invalidated. They applied the same idea to the ministration of the sacraments.

Augustine fought the Donatists with his whole being. He argued that the efficacy of any of the aspects performed by a minister were dependent not upon the minister but upon God who made them valid.

But it was not either of these two controversies that produced Augustine's greatest book. Augustine's greatest book was written as a direct consequence of the fall of Rome. In 410 AD, Rome fell to the Goth invader Alaric. He plundered and pillaged the city, and the world was left in shock. The fall of Rome would have been comparable to the fall of Washington D.C. Two groups immediately sprang up. The pagans said, "See, the city fell because it embraced Christianity." The Christians argued, "See, it fell because of immorality and because many of the people of Rome failed to convert to Christianity." You can see the implications that such a study might have for us today. I think you can see how

much the same argument is being posed here in America, in view of our declining culture.

Different men responded to the fall of Rome in different ways. Constantine argued that we should take back the culture by force. Sounds familiar doesn't it. Jerome argued that we should abandon the culture and retreat to smaller Christian communities. That too, sounds familiar. Augustine took an entirely different tack. He argued that the fall of Rome was a sovereign act of God and that the fall itself provided an unparalleled opportunity to advance the gospel. He gave his explanation of the fall of Rome in his book The City of God.

The first part of the book is dedicated to vindicating Christianity. He argued that the fall of Rome was not related to the city becoming Christian. In the second half of the book, he argues that there has always been two great divisions in the world. Christians he argued can never be entrenched in this world. They are by nature and confession looking for a city whose builder and maker is God. Listen to how he says it.

In this unfriendly world, in evil days like these, the Church through the lowliness she now endures is winning the sublime station she is to have in heaven. Meanwhile, the sting of fears and ache of tears, the vexatious toil and hazardous temptations, teach her to rejoice only in the healthy joy of hope. With so many sinners mingled with the saints, all caught in the single fishing net the Gospel mentions, this life on earth is like a sea in which good and bad fishes caught in a net swim about indistinguishably until the net is beached, and the bad ones are separated from the good. Only then does God so reign in the good, as in His temple, that He may be all in all..... So it falls out that in this world, in evil days like these, the Church walks onward like a wayfarer stricken by the world's hostility, but comforted by the mercy of God. Nor does this state of affairs date only from the days of Christ's and His Apostles' presence on earth. It

was never any different from the days when the first just man, Abel, was slain by his ungodly brother. So it shall be until this world is no more.

So the City of God written by Augustine turned out to be one of the great books ever written in Christendom. It is definitely one of the ten great books ever written in Christianity, but still this was not Augustine's great work. His greatest controversy, the one that consumed him, and made us ever to be in his debt was his controversy with Pelagius.

What I want to do in the next few minutes is give you a thumbnail sketch of how Augustine argued against Pelagius. It would be impossible for me in even the next five or six lessons to exhaust the core of Augustine's thought. I will not even try. What I want to do is whet your appetite and encourage you to study on your own.

To start with Augustine could be held responsible for the start of the fray with Pelagius. It was his prayer that so incensed Pelagius.

Lord, Grant what You command,
And command what You will.

And it is to this starting place that we must go. Augustine believed that man was incapable of obeying God's commands without the grace of God. He believed that in Adam's fall, we were damaged and by damaged he meant really damaged. He often spoke of mankind as a "mess of sin". Listen to how he says it.

Therefore all men are...one condemned mass of sin that owes a debt of punishment to the divine and supreme justice. Whether it [the debt] be exacted or be condoned, there is no injustice.

Now Augustine was not exactly sure how this corruption was communicated from generation to generation. He was not sure if the corruption was biological, or imputed, or whether it was the act of sex that communicated this disposition to sin. But he was certain, dead certain, that the fact of corruption was, in fact, real. He knew it was true because of what he found in his own sinful heart. In one place Augustine writes that his heart was so seared over by sin that he prayed to God,

God grant me chastity and grant temperance, only not yet.

You see how refreshing he is, how honest. Augustine believed man was damaged. He liked to use different metaphors to illustrate that. He often spoke of Christ as the Great Physician who came to heal us of our sins. He often spoke of men being without strength and said God gave us strength in Christ. He spoke of us as being lazy men stirred up to do God's will. But always these metaphors were used in connection with God's grace, with God's kindness. Augustine also used the metaphor of death and dying to describe man's plight. One of his most famous quotes was that,

...in all human society the dead are replaced by the dying.
(Quoted from Credenda/Agenda)

But in spite of his view of man's fallen condition, Augustine did believe in "free will". He argued that man's will is always free. But do not be alarmed.

Augustine also argued that our free will is held captive by our nature. He phrased it, “free will held captive”. You see Augustine argued that there is free will, but that free will is entirely dependent on what kind of person we are. If we are sinners, our will is free to sin. If we are liberated by Christ’s blood, we are free to obey. When a person is regenerated, Augustine argued their “free will is set free”. But for Augustine, this act of being freed was done solely by God and solely through God’s grace. There was nothing the sinner could contribute but his sin, rebellion and disobedience. Later, Luther would take this concept found in Augustine and turn it into his most important work, the Bondage of the Will.

But it was Augustine, not Luther, who saved the church from the clutches of Pelagianism. He fought both Pelagius and the Bishop of Rome to secure for the church the doctrine of man’s inherent sinfulness. He saw Pelagius condemned and excommunicated at the Council of Carthage in 418 AD. Yet, within a hundred years the church would have to fight the same battle all over again. And when they did they did so with the ammunition that Augustine had stockpiled in his battle with Pelagius. Yet they softened Augustine’s doctrine of man’s depravity. In our own generation, we have softened it even further. It behooves us in this generation to become familiar again with Augustine, not just for the sake of knowing church history. But because unless we become genuinely aware of how bad the news is with regard to our sin, we will have no idea how good the news is with regard to God’s grace.

When my father died it fell to me to deliver his eulogy. I had thought much about what I might say, but I had not really expected to speak. But one of the

ministers my dad had chosen became seriously ill and I was asked to give the eulogy. I said:

My father taught me all I know about grace.

When I was a young boy, my father got a new electric shaver for his birthday. He loved that razor. Since we were poor, both of my parents worked. My older brothers also worked so I spent a lot of time at home by myself or out roaming the neighborhood.

Anyway, my dad knowing the way I was gave me solemn instruction not to mess with his new razor. I have often thought had he not said that, I probably would not have ever even been tempted. But he did and I was.

I started out by looking at it. It was beautiful. It was black and chrome and shiny. Certainly, if a boy was wanting to roam the neighborhood with a pleasant appearance, this was a razor that could provide a clean, close, comfortable shave. It wasn't long before I began to touch it. I held it in my hands. I rolled it over reading the words printed on it, getting used to the weight of it. It wasn't long before I began to shave with it. Once, twice, three times a day. You have to be careful when your seven or eight because that unsightly 5:00 o'clock shadow can really be a problem. Later, I began to take it apart, to look at the blades and the screen. Eventually, I discovered how the cord could be unplugged. When I unplugged it, I noticed that there were two little holes in the end of the cord. I also noticed they were just about the size of the legs on a Bobbie pin.

I took one of my mother's Bobbie pins and spread the legs on it and stuck it into the holes of the cord. It happened in an instant. There was a loud pop, flame, and the distinct odor of burning rubber and burning flesh. I looked at the cord and saw that shorting out the cord had burned the end of the cord away. I also noticed that my hand had been burned, and though I am sure it must have hurt, my thoughts were already moving to the other parts of my anatomy that were most certainly going to be burned later that afternoon.

I looked at the clock. It was about 10:00 AM. I had roughly six hours to live. I walked through our humble home. I looked at this picture or that old tattered chair and thought to myself, "How beautiful these things are."

I sat and looked at the clock and waited. I knew what I had done. I knew there was no place to hide. I decided that I would face my dad and tell him the truth. The clock ticked.

About 3:30 PM, I moved out to the porch to wait for my dad. In those days, he car-pooled with another man and the man often dropped him off at the end of the block. I saw the man's pick-up stop and I saw my dad get out of the car. My dad walked with a swagger not unlike John Wayne. But it seemed this day that he walked very slowly.

At last, he strolled across the yard and walked right up to the porch. He knew something was wrong; he always knew and he came right up to me and towered over me. I looked up at his incredibly blue, incredibly penetrating eyes, and I just shouted it out.

“Daddy, I stuck a Bobby-pin in your new razor and burned the whole thing completely up.”

He looked down at me and leaned his face very close. We were virtually eyeball to eyeball. And he said, “Son, you know I love you. I told you not to play with my razor because I was afraid you might get hurt.” With that he walked up the steps and opened the screen door.

“But dad, you won’t be able to ever use that razor again.”, I cried.

He turned with just a hint of a smile and said, “You know I never really cared all that much for the thing anyway.” And he went into the house.

Looking back I realize that there was much more to learn about grace. I was yet to learn about the necessity of justice, but I had at least become aware of one important part of grace, mercy. I had not really learned all I was to learn but I was on the right track.

If you’re here this morning burdened by the cares of your own sin let me say there is grace and there is mercy. The bad news is really bad, we are hip deep in sin and its consequences. But God has provided mercy deep enough and wide enough in Christ to cover all your sin. This morning you may feel the weight and oppression of your sin but there is balm in Gilead and the Doctor in.