



## CHRISTIAN EDUCATION: LESSON 157

Theological disputes regarding the doctrines of grace are nothing new, having been defined and debated throughout church history. The following is a summary of the Pelagian Controversy in the 5<sup>th</sup> century.

**Pelagius** – Pelagius was born in Britain in 354 AD. He later became a monk. He was disturbed by Augustine’s prayer, “Grant what thou commandest, and command what thou dost desire.” Pelagius believed that man is capable of doing whatever God has commanded, and does not need God to enable him to do that. Pelagius taught that man was created good, with a free will, having the equal ability to choose good or evil. When Adam sinned, he sinned according to his free will. Adam’s sin did not corrupt his nature, and did not destroy his ability to choose good. Adam was created mortal, thus his natural death was not the result of sin, for he would have died regardless of what he did.

Pelagius did not regard Adam as the representative of humanity, thus his sin had no consequence for the human race. Adam’s descendants do not inherit his guilt, nor are they born with a sinful nature. Adam’s sin only served as a bad example for his posterity. Pelagius held that all human beings are born like Adam before he sinned, sinless and uncorrupted in nature, with free will. Man is able to avoid sin and do what is right. Sin weakens the will and leads to bad habits, but it does not result in its moral inability. Pelagius affirmed that men could be sinless and perfect, and some were. He taught that God also gave grace to man through His law and the Gospel, providing man with instruction and illumination regarding what is right and good, with Christ being the chief example of these. Though God’s grace assists man, making it easier for him to do good, it is not a necessity. For Pelagius, regeneration was not a change in man’s nature but the forgiveness of sins, and the illumination of the mind and will by the truth. With respect to election, Pelagius held that God chose those whom He foreknew would be holy and sinless, based on their free will.

**Augustine** – Augustine was born in North Africa, also in 354 AD. He became a Christian in 386, and was later ordained as a priest, and then as a bishop. Augustine taught that man was created by God good and upright. Adam was created with the ability to sin and the ability not to sin. Man was not created with an immutable nature, but one that could change. Adam had a free will, but not in the sense that it had the equal ability to choose good or evil; rather, Adam was originally created with a positive inclination towards God and righteousness. Augustine also held that Adam was created with the ability to die and the ability not to die. When Adam sinned he died, spiritually and naturally.

Augustine acknowledged Adam as the representative of the human race. His sin was not just a personal sin, but one which had devastating consequences for His descendants. Human beings inherit Adam’s guilt and corrupt nature, their wills and minds being inclined and in bondage to sin. The nature of man became one of moral inability. Both Adam’s sin and Christ’s obedience were vicarious acts. Augustine affirmed that even after the fall man retains his free will, the ability to choose what he desires in any circumstance, but he has lost his true liberty, and being in bondage to sin he always chooses evil.

Thus, to be saved from his corrupt situation, the nature or heart of man must be changed, and this is the gracious work of God alone, His work of regeneration. Once God has thus liberated the heart of a sinner, he will desire and come to Christ. Regarding predestination, Augustine wrote that the elect are not those who “are elected because they have believed, but who are elected that they may believe.” And this election was grounded in the good pleasure of God.

**The Pelagian Controversy** – The doctrines of Pelagius were condemned as heresy by church councils in Carthage, North Africa (411, 416 and 418); also by the third ecumenical council in Ephesus (431). The doctrines defined by Augustine were declared biblical and affirmed as the doctrines of the Church.