

Ephesians 3:14-21     Augie and Pelie  
John 6:1-21  
July 28, 2024

About 1600 years ago, when Christianity had achieved a level of acceptance that gave it standing, some credibility and access to political power, during the time of the fall of the Roman Empire, there came to be a conflict within the ranks. Although most assuredly an oversimplification, it has been presented as if it were between a North African bishop named Augustine and an English monk name Pelagius.

There is actually a town in Florida named after the bishop, St. Augustine, and I am unaware of much of anything named after Pelagius except a heresy, revealing the preference of the church for Augustine. There is for good measure even a dispute over the correct pronunciation of his name; “AUG-us-tine” versus “Aug-US-tine.” If people do not have something to argue about, they will invent. I figure that if I say his name enough, even those of you who have never heard it before might remember it, and pronounce it like I do.

Most Protestant theology is heavily influenced by Augustine. Augustine was the champion of the Grace and the Sovereignty of God and Original Sin (for without Sin there is no need for Grace), that is, the belief that salvation comes from God alone and there is no human contribution to it. We are saved only by the free Grace of God, without any help from human merit.

Pelagius, on the other hand, was sort of the patron saint of Free Will, the idea that salvation is the result of God’s mercy and grace *with* human decision-making and striving as well. This view, in its extreme form is called Pelagianism. It stands opposed to the idea that people are *not*, at least in some small way, agents of their own salvation. In popular terms, you will sometimes hear people say that they believe human nature is fundamentally good.

I think I will just call them Augie and Pelie, not to belittle but to humanize them, and to emphasize that they were both faithful Christians living in difficult times and trying to make sense of the meaning of the history they were living through and of their faith. They were both involved in a debate in their day, which took on its own personality in the millennium and a half after they were gone.

The main collection of churches, including Roman Catholicism, and most of the Protestants; Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and Baptists, and many others, at least present themselves strongly on the Augie side of the ledger. Both Martin Luther and John Calvin were known as Augustinian theologians.

Be mindful, however, that there is a little Pelie in all of us. America is an active culture, and even Baptists always ask first, “what can we do, what should we do?” We live in the era of pragmatism, where meaning in life is derived from action, and from finding solutions, and there is a general belief that we are up to the task. A theology that confronts us with the

notion that there is nothing we can do is unlikely to be well-received.

This truth may only involve the successful negotiation of the necessary intellectual gymnastics so that one can figure out the logic of things well enough to accept paradoxical ideas such as the Trinity or the Incarnation, or muster up the energy to believe. Faith itself becomes a work.

The accomplishment of accepting the difficult doctrines is offered as the human contribution to salvation. No matter what the rituals and rules and doctrines may be, it is the human tendency to believe that humans beings are basically good and to desire to take part in their own salvation. We would like to be able to say that we earned it, when the gospel is clear that it comes as the free gift of God.

The conversation between Augie and Pelie goes on, even in the so-called orthodox churches, has a way going on and on without resolution. Sometimes it seems like a political campaign with extreme rhetoric and ridiculous accusations hurled back and forth.

Whatever words are used on one side can be criticized by the other, and vice versa. There is a cloud of confusion that can make a person want to forget the whole debate and go fishing, or shopping, or just to go take the dog for a walk.

The Doctrine of Original Sin has been used in harmful ways that can only be said to be sinful themselves, and is evidence of the truth of the doctrine.

Some turn it into a bad thing, by asserting that if God is the author and the finisher of salvation then either everyone should be saved or God is unfair, arbitrarily consigning some to perdition on a capricious whim, or blaming the catastrophes of history such as WW1 or the Holocaust on the “humanism” of modern society.

The texts read today paint a different picture, one that I hope to be able to convey. In them, we see three miracles. From the Gospel of John there is the Feeding of the Multitude, and in its aftermath, the journey on foot of Jesus across lake on the water.

Interestingly, in John’s gospel, the powerful deeds that are often called miracles in English are called “signs,” because they are meant to be understood as - pointing to the work of God (When he got to the other side, the people . . . comically, asked him for a sign, as if they didn’t understand the one they had just seen). “And the work of God is this,” Jesus told them, “to believe in the one he has sent.” Even our faith is less a human contribution to salvation than a miracle of God.

The third miracle is found in the Letter to the Ephesians. In it, the whole idea of God’s grace is presented as a wonderful gift to behold. It is the miracle of catching a glimpse of God’s love, seeing it, understanding it, in some ways being swallowed up and overwhelmed by it.

And the scriptures do not use Grace or Sin or Faith or Free Will as blunt instruments; there is no attempt to manipulate or control; but only to inform. The conversation is a gracious reminder of universal truth. In the end, perhaps it *is* better to err on the side of, “Sola Gracia, Only Grace,” and, “Total Depravity, or Original Sin,” for if they tell us that we are not capable of *any good*, not even of one simple kindness, except for the presence of God’s grace in us, then the only conclusion we can draw is that God’s grace is all around; in every kindness, in each good deed, in every speaking of the truth in love, act of generosity, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant; the whole world is filled up with the presence of the Lord. This message like is a nourishing meal that results in a spiritual feeding of a multitude.

And we are led not to feelings of guilt but awareness of Divine Presence; and to humility and gratitude as the appropriate attitudes of the heart, and to the pursuit of reconciliation and concern for the other, and to the aspiration towards any goodness we can find it in ourselves to do, because they represent the presence of God in our inner selves.

Sin as an idea is meant to help us avoid a misplaced confidence in human moral ability that leads to arrogance, overreach, constant disappointment and infighting, discouragement, hyper-judgmentalism, disunity.

Then these two ideas, Grace and Freedom, can only be seen as miraculous wonders of God, so that the

result is *not discouragement and confusion* at the mystifying theology of the church or the news of the world, or the trouble in our lives, but magnificent praise at the power of God’s love . . . expressed in this prayer that wells up in the words of Paul. Here is a clue, the result of the whole conversation (God bless Augie and Pelie) always ends in an exclamation of excellence such as we find here, or else we have misunderstood it;

I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.” Sounds to me like a miraculous feeding of the soul. Let this be also our prayer.

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

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