Will and Grace: The Essence of the Pelagian Debate

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Introduction

The Christian church’s early centuries saw a number of clarifying councils and theological treatises directed at objective doctrines such as the triunity of God and the hypostatic union of two natures in the person of Christ. By the late fourth century the discussions were becoming more subjective: To what extent does a person possess free will? What is the cause of sin? What are the theological underpinnings of salvation, and to what extent does the grace of God hold sway in that process? Such questions naturally led back to the very beginning of time—to consideration of the nature of Adam and the consequences of his sin, both for himself and for the human race. While these questions were not new, it was only at this time that they came to the fore in the church’s collective consciousness.
The grace of God and the sinful culpability of humanity had been affirmed and even assumed by the early church, yet the dearth of clearly defined doctrine in that area inevitably led to poor theological constructions and, ultimately, the emergence of heterodoxy. Those involved in the debate came to stand on opposite sides of a theological divide that has ever since been associated with the heresy of Pelagianism. This article will identify the major figures caught up in the controversy, sketch the historical context, and analyze the substance and implications of the contrasting theological systems, with special attention to the contemporary church and religion in Asia.

Origins of Pelagian Thought

It has often been assumed that Pelagianism originated in the mind and ministry of Pelagius himself. Recent scholarship, however, has revisited the controversy and provided fresh insight into the birth of this system of thought. Pelagius, the principal figure in the debate, has been “lift[ed]...out of his theological isolation,” and “lines of continuity between him and Christian thinkers both previous and contemporary with him” have been discovered.1 From the extant works of Jerome and Augustine, for instance, it is clear that Pelagius drew heavily on the work of one Sextus. Jerome identified this individual as a pagan Pythagorean philosopher, and Augustine came to agree.2 However, Robert F. Evans makes the case that,

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correctly or not, at that time Sextus was generally believed to have been none other than Bishop Xystus of Rome, who had been martyred in 258. If this identification was indeed commonplace, and if Sextus’s works were widely read by Christians of that era, then at least Pelagius would have seen his own developing theology as within the Christian mainstream.3

More pertinent, however, is the role of a contemporary of Pelagius about whose identity and beliefs there is no credible doubt.4 Rufinus was a Syrian priest and monk who had spent some time in close proximity to Jerome in Bethlehem. He would later write critically of Jerome and have a significant influence on Pelagius and his follower Caelestius, who would become quite outspoken in defense of what became known as Pelagianism. Caelestius had met Rufinus in Rome in 399 and had been working closely with Pelagius since around 390.5

It could even be said that Rufinus was, in fact, the first Pelagian. After all, chief among his teachings was the denial of the doctrine

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3 Evans, Pelagius, 44.


of original sin. Augustine describes an inquiry by Bishop Aurelius of Carthage concerning Caelestius’s view that humans were not universally cursed by the sin of Adam. Caelestius argued that he was not unique in holding to this, but when the bishop pressed him to identify others who shared the same position, he could only name Rufinus. Yet despite the influence of Sextus, Rufinus, and others, clearly Pelagianism is most indebted to its namesake, who issued a steady stream of polemical works meant to clarify and disseminate a system of thought that would eventually be anathematized as heresy.

Emergence of the Controversy

Pelagius (370–420) was a British monk “famous for his piety and austerity.” Not much of his story is known, but he came to Rome to work among the poor along the city’s docks. He soon noticed that many who claimed to be Christian were living lives that hardly bore witness to their profession, and he was concerned that the “demoralizingly pessimistic” doctrines of original sin and the necessity of the free grace of God for salvation had led to their casual moral laxity. He believed that, like Adam, we are all born innocent and in possession of free will, and that if we believe it is in our nature to sin, then we would feel at least some degree of

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7Kelly claims that Pelagius was a Welsh monk. J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), 357. In truth, while commentators agree that he was born in the British Isles, it is not known with certainty whether he was Welsh, British, or even Scottish or Irish. Also, while he was referred to as a “monachus,” it is not absolutely clear whether he was, in fact, a monk. For the quote, see Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, vol. 1, *The Early Church to the Reformation* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), 214.


justification for our sinful decisions. Further, he considered it a diminution of the character of God to declare that men and women, who stand at the pinnacle of God’s creation, are nevertheless unable to avoid sinning. He especially objected to the increasingly influential works of Augustine, treatises such as *To Simplician—On Various Questions*, in which Augustine argued, “From Adam has come one mass of sinners and godless men, in which both Jews and Gentiles belong to one lump, apart from the grace of God.”¹⁰ Above all, Pelagius was offended by Augustine’s well-known prayer, “Give what you command, and then command whatever you will.”¹¹ To Pelagius, this suggested that “men were puppets wholly dependent upon the movements of divine grace.”¹² Yet while it has been customary to claim that the Pelagian bell was first rung when Pelagius encountered Augustine’s prayer, the rumblings of controversy reach farther back and can be heard already in the interaction between Jerome and Rufinus.

### Jerome and the Pelagians

Although Jerome and Rufinus had presumably had a cordial relationship while both were monks in Bethlehem, subsequently a controversy arose between them that would set the stage for the later full-scale Pelagian conflict.¹³ Jerome had made it clear in his writings that he was opposed to the heretical doctrines of Origen regarding the pre-existence of the soul, the ultimate reconciliation of all things, 

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¹³“[T]he course of events leading to Pelagius’ condemnation, in which Augustine played such a prominent role, is in fact an indirect result of the final phase of Jerome’s Origenist controversies.” Evans, *Pelagius*, 25.
etc. However, in his commentary on the book of Ephesians he appeared to draw on Origen’s ideas and interpretations. Rufinus, an unabashed Origenist, concluded from this that Jerome was sympathetic to Origen and thus self-contradictory. He wrote: “What he [Jerome] calls on us on the one hand to condemn, he exhorts us on the other hand to follow: what he asserts, that he reproves: what he hates, that he does.”

Jerome responded with his three-volume *Apology against Rufinus*, straining to defend his position.

Chief among Jerome’s quarrels with Origen and Rufinus was his clash with them over the possibility of sinless perfection. For Jerome, the assertion that a person could live a life free from sin was contrary to the gospel and, more significantly, a usurpation of God’s divine nature. After all, Jerome contended, it was characteristic of God alone to be both impeccable and immutable. To claim even potential impeccability for mere men and women was either to sully God’s holiness or, conversely, to elevate men and women to a place properly belonging only to God. Thirteen years after Jerome had stated his case, weakly defending his use of Origen while forcefully opposing the idea of sinless perfection, and thinking the matter had been resolved, he was confronted with yet another assailant claiming the same thing. This was, of course, Pelagius.

Pelagius, it has been said, was “shooting arrows from the quill of Rufinus.” Drawing heavily on the theological tradition of Origen and Rufinus, and like Rufinus some years earlier, he noted Jerome’s simultaneous dependence on and vilification of Origen. In response, Jerome rejoined the fray, writing once more against the possibility of sinlessness, arguing that according to Pelagius, humanity was even capable of attaining divine perfection. In Jerome’s letter to

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Ctesiphon, who had inquired concerning Pelagian doctrine, he wrote: “Already before the arrival of your letter many in the East have been deceived into a pride which apes humility and have said with the devil: ‘I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God; I will be like the Most High.’ Can there be greater presumption than to claim not likeness to God but equality with Him, and so to compress into a few words the poisonous doctrines of all the heretics...?”17

Pelagius denied the charge, noting that in his view, humanity achieved sinlessness by obedience, while God’s sinlessness was by nature, so that the distinction between the Creator and the created remained intact.18 Nevertheless, the fight had been joined, with battle lines drawn between Pelagius and his sympathizers on one side and, on the other, Jerome and later Augustine.

**Augustine and the Pelagians**

Augustine, born in 354, was baptized at the age of 32, ordained a priest at 37 and a bishop five years later. He was a prolific writer with a keen sense of the essentials of the faith. B. B. Warfield was convinced that Augustine had been providentially raised up precisely in order to defend the doctrines of the bondage of the human will and the necessity of the grace of God against the teachings of the Pelagians. Regarding the centrality of grace in Augustine’s writings against Pelagianism, Warfield wrote:

> Both by nature and by grace, Augustine was formed to be the champion of truth in this controversy. Of a naturally philosophical temperament, he saw into the springs of life with a vividness of mental perception to which most men are strangers; and his own experiences in his long life of resistance to, and then of yielding to, the drawings of God’s grace, gave him a clear apprehension of the great evangelic principle that God seeks men, not men

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God, such as no sophistry could cloud. However much his philosophy or theology might undergo change in other particulars, there was one conviction too deeply imprinted upon his heart ever to fade or alter—the conviction of the ineffableness of God’s grace. Grace—man’s absolute dependence on God as the source of all good—this was the common, nay, the formative element, in all stages of his doctrinal development.  

Augustine did, in fact, become the leading champion of orthodoxy in the dispute with Pelagianism, and it is his name and body of work that the modern world chiefly associates with the Pelagians’ condemnation. He entered the debate in 412 with On the Merits and Forgiveness of Sins and, soon after, On the Spirit and the Letter. While both of these works argued against Pelagian ideas, Augustine had not yet engaged with Pelagius personally. Evans suggests that the matter took on greater urgency for Augustine when, in 415, he read Pelagius’s treatise, On Nature, and saw that Pelagius was quoting the writings of a number of church fathers, including Augustine’s own earlier publications, to support his theological conclusions. Augustine responded with a major work, On Nature and Grace, establishing himself as the greatest advocate of orthodoxy in the controversy. While Jerome’s works focused more narrowly on Pelagian teachings regarding the nature of God and the possibility of sinless perfection, Augustine’s works tackled the broader concerns of the bondage of the human will and the necessity of the grace of God.

Doctrinal Issues

The essence of the Pelagian controversy may best be introduced anecdotally. A man was preaching to some poor homeless people, people without much hope in this world. The preacher quoted

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20Evans, Pelagius, 85.
some lines from Rudyard Kipling’s poem, “If”: “If you can fill the unforgiving minute/ With sixty seconds’ worth of distance run,/ Yours is the Earth and everything that’s in it,/ And—which is more—you’ll be a Man, my son!” The poem offers more suggestions for what it means to live a good live—but Kipling’s is essentially a Pelagian message. As the preacher continued to quote from the poem, he was finally interrupted by a voice from the back of the room: “What if I cannot?” This is a key element of the Augustinian response. We cannot.21

While there were other ancillary differences between the school of Rufinus and Pelagius and that of Jerome and Augustine—for example, over the purpose and efficacy of baptism22—their disagreement hinged on the doctrine of original sin. In fact, each school’s system of thought can be described as logical and internally consistent when its view of original sin is accepted as foundational. Pelagius held that since sin was not a substance, it could not have been passed down from Adam to his descendants.23 While Pelagius admitted that Adam’s sin had done them injury, he meant that it was injurious “by imitation, not organically.”24 Adam, then, had set a bad precedent, but in no way had his action determined ours. In Pelagius’s words, “There are enough things for which we are morally accountable without blaming us for the things for which we are not.”25 For Pelagius, a person born without sin and with free will could in every situation simply choose not to sin. The inescapable

21Calhoun, “Augustine and the Pelagian Controversy.”

22The doctrinal issues central to the Pelagian controversy were actually argued around the premise of the necessity and efficacy of infant baptism. Space does not permit an exposition of the parties’ views regarding baptism, and regarding infant baptism in particular; however, the theological conclusions defended by both parties may be understood to apply to all, including infants, baptized or not.


25Quoted in ibid., 160.
logical implication was that such a person did not absolutely require the grace of God for his or her salvation, though grace certainly made salvation easier. For Augustine, on the other hand, a person born in sin and with a will in bondage to sin could do nothing, least of all obtain salvation, apart from the grace of God.

F. F. Bruce has said that Pelagius was the "spiritual father" of all those who embrace the idea of "justification by decency." It was Pelagius's view that since God had given humanity the commandment to be holy, men and women must be able to do so, else God would be unjust. This formed the basis for the Pelagian understanding of the will. Pelagius had what today would be described as a libertarian understanding of free will; he took it for granted that since the will is free, it must be able to make choices spontaneously, independent of any predisposition for good or evil on the part of an individual. One consequence of this shallow understanding of the effects of the Fall was that Pelagius's doctrine of grace was radically different from that of Augustine, whose doctrine of original sin made libertarian free will impossible. Warfield commented, "[I]n emphasizing free will, he [Pelagius] denied the ruin of the race and the necessity of grace." Thus, the controversy revolved around the doctrines of will and grace, each of which will be considered in turn.

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27 Again, space does not permit an extended discussion of libertarian free will or the Augustinian alternative, compatibilist free will; on the latter, see below. For examinations of free will from various theological and philosophical perspectives, see David Basinger and Randall Basinger, eds., *Predestination and Free Will: Four Views of Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1986).

Explaining his understanding of the freedom of the will, Pelagius wrote: “We distinguish three things and arrange them in a definite order. We put in the first place ‘posse’ [ability, possibility]; in the second, ‘velle’ [volition]; in the third, ‘esse’ [existence, actuality]. The posse we assign to nature, the velle to will, the esse to actual realization. The first of these, posse, is properly ascribed to God, who conferred it on his creatures; while the other two, velle and esse, are to be referred to the human agent since they have their source in his will.”

Humanity’s unconditional free will and men and women’s consequent responsibility for their actions were “the keystone of his [Pelagius’s] whole system.” He believed that free will enabled a person to obey, obedience rendered a person righteous, and righteousness was necessary if a person was to be considered a Christian. He defined a true Christian as “not in word, but in deed… holy, innocent, unsoiled, blameless, [one] in whose heart there is no malice but only piety and goodness.” Since God had granted to each person the ability to live without sin, it was necessary that a person live up to the divine standard of blamelessness in thought as well as action.

By way of contrast, Augustine held that people were quite unable to do that which Pelagius insisted they must do. Drawing on scriptural passages that Augustine believed elucidated the doctrine of original sin, he adamantly maintained that the human will was in bondage to sin as a result of the Fall and could no more choose to do what was right and good, at least from God’s perspective, than a dead man could get up and walk of his own volition. Chiefly, Augustine was concerned with the good act of choosing to put one’s faith in Christ for salvation. Apart from the grace of God, he

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31 Quoted in ibid., 360.
insisted, this was impossible. He summarized his position with the observation that there are only two basic loves: “love of self, even to the contempt of God,” and “love of God, even to the contempt of self.” Of course there are many other loves, but the point is that these two are fundamental to who we are, defining us as Christian or non-Christian. Thus, a non-Christian has in his or her inmost being the love of self. Whatever proceeds from that, however “good” it may appear to other people, is sinful in the eyes of God because of the taint of this selfish core. The act may be inherently good, but the actor is inherently sinful, and God weighs the actor’s heart above all else. This, to Augustine, was the true nature and singular intent of our velle, and the resultant esse could never be anything but evil apart from the grace of God.

Regarding the will of Adam, it was Augustine’s position that the first man had indeed been innocent and in possession of free will before the Fall, so that it had been possible for him not to sin (posse non peccare). Further, contrary to Pelagius, Augustine held that God had created Adam to be immortal and that the Fall had brought about his death not only spiritually but also physically. Augustine wrote: “But in addition to the passage where God in punishment said, ‘Dust thou art, unto dust shalt thou return,’ —a passage which I cannot understand how any one can apply except to the death of the body,—there are other testimonies likewise, from which it most fully appears that by reason of sin the human race has brought upon itself not spiritual death merely, but the death of the body also.”

Most significantly for the doctrine of original sin and the consequent depravity of the will, Augustine declared that the penalty for Adam’s sin was transmitted to all his progeny. Because Adam sinned, not only do we die physically, we are also born “spiritually

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33 Augustine, On the Merits and Forgiveness of Sin, in Saint Augustin’s Anti-Pelagian Works, 16.
dead” (Eph 2:1 NCV). As a result, our will is depraved, and we cannot not sin (non posse non peccare). Apart from the initiative work of God’s grace to produce saving faith within us, we would ever only will to sin and would thus be forever lost in our natural state.

**Grace**

The doctrine of grace is, perhaps surprisingly, not often dealt with in the writings of the early church. It is, of course, present throughout the pages of Scripture, most notably in the letters of Paul, but, as already noted, the chief thrust of the early theologians was to get straight the various objective biblical doctrines under attack by such heretical movements as Gnosticism and Arianism. It is not until Augustine that we find a theologian who was truly immersed in and amazed by the grace of God. Because of the severity of his doctrine of original sin, he was compelled either to sink into the hopelessness that attends the command to do what one cannot— or to flee to the doctrine of efficacious grace.

What is grace? Augustine defined it this way: “The grace of God, through Jesus Christ our Lord, must be understood as that by which alone we are delivered from evil, and without which we do absolutely no good thing.”34 By way of contrast, Pelagius radically redefined grace to mean nothing more than the “grace of creation,” whereby God had created humanity with the freedom of will to choose not to sin, this freedom not having been lost in the Fall, and what Augustine called the Pelagian grace of “the law and the teaching.”35 Augustine summarized Pelagius’s claims regarding the latter: “‘God helps us,’ says he, ‘by His teaching and revelation, whilst He opens the eyes of our heart; whilst He points out to us the future, that we may not be absorbed in the present; whilst He

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discovers to us the snares of the devil; whilst He enlightens us with the manifold and ineffable gift of heavenly grace.” 36 Augustine offered this scathing assessment: “I have nowhere been able to find in them [Pelagius’s writings] that he acknowledges such a grace as helps not only that ‘natural capacity of willing and acting’ (which according to him we possess, even when we neither will a good thing nor do it), but also the will and the action itself, by the ministration of the Holy Ghost.” 37

In short, there was a vast gulf between Augustine’s concept of grace working within men and women’s hearts, drawing and enabling them to do that which they were, from conception, unable to do, and Pelagius’s concept of grace working externally, offering men and women mere illumination to do that which they were, from creation, already empowered to do. The debate raged on for some years before there was any sense of resolution. Philip Schaff offered this rather pointed epilogue to the tale, focusing on the principals on the losing side of the debate: “After this Pelagius and Celestius found a fitting harbour of refuge with Nestorius of Constantinople, and so all three were condemned together by the council of Ephesus, he that denied the incarnation of the Word, and they twain that denied the necessity of that incarnation and of the grace purchased thereby.” 38 After the anathematizing of Pelagianism at Ephesus in 431, at the Council of Orange in 529 the church essentially adopted the doctrines espoused by Augustine, this being reaffirmed by subsequent councils. 39 Nevertheless, in varying degrees, the debate over sin, grace, and free will continues today.

36Ibid.
37Ibid., 230.
39According to Warfield, the Council of Orange “affirmed an anxiously guarded Augustinianism, a somewhat weakened Augustinianism, but yet a distinctive Augustinianism.” Warfield, “Augustine and the Pelagian Controversy,” 67.
The Debate in
Contemporary Context

Pelagianism in the Church

Many of those who profess faith in Christ today have at least an underlying reliance on the Pelagian idea of meritorious salvation. Indeed, R. C. Sproul has said, “Pelagianism has a death grip on the modern church.”40 This is reflected in the generally accepted premise that God rewards the “good” person who “was always so nice” or who “would always lend a helping hand.” Such accolades, often heard at funerals, are understood to imply that surely the deceased has been ushered into heaven on the strength of his or her good conduct. Few recognize that their eternal destiny is secured only by the grace of God as attested in Scripture: “For by grace are ye saved...” (Eph 2:8).

There is much talk in evangelical circles of the free will we all possess. This is appropriate—to a point. But what we have is Augustinian free will, not the Pelagian free will that so many assume we have. We are indeed free to choose that which we will to choose. We are free to do that which we will to do. We are even free to believe that which we will to believe. Yet according to Scripture, the will, apart from the regenerative work of the Holy Spirit, is always, wholly, and actively inclined to evil.41 We do indeed have the freedom to choose, act, or believe as we will, but our will, being captive to sin, always opts to sin. As the Westminster Confession puts it: “Man, by his fall into a state of sin, has wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation: so as, a natural man, being altogether averse from that good, and dead in sin, is not able, by his own strength, to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto.”42

41 See John 8:44; Rom 3:10, 23; Ps 51:5, et al.
42 Westminster Confession of Faith, IX.3.
Thus, while fallen men and women may will materially good actions—e.g., acts of altruism or philanthropy—these are not spiritually good actions, because the latter must proceed from an unalloyed love for God. Jonathan Edwards powerfully elaborated on this, arguing that humanity possesses the natural ability to choose good or evil but not the moral ability to do so. Sin has so corrupted the nature of fallen men and women that their wills are in bondage to it. Regeneration by grace endues the will with the capacity to do good; in this sense, the truth really does set us free (John 8:32).

Asian Religions

There can be little argument that something very much like Pelagianism is the system of thought most adhered to in the modern world. In religions other than Christianity, it is often boldly declared that something—good deeds, religious obligations, etc.—must be done in order to merit salvation. With the understanding that such things must be done comes the implication that they can be done. It is also true, however, that a continuum of philosophies is to be found among the religions and spiritual traditions of the world, running the gamut from this bold Pelagianism at one end to a fatalistic distortion of Augustinianism at the other.

Such a range of perspectives can certainly be seen in Asian religions. At the Pelagian end of the spectrum, Confucianism generally adheres to a libertarian understanding of free will—tempered, perhaps, by “moral luck.” At the other end of the spectrum, the fatalistic concept of bahala na (akin to the Spanish que sera, sera) is deeply embedded in Filipino folk spirituality.

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Yet these extremes are not always demarcated in a tidy fashion; rather, they are often held in a confusing tension, as may be seen in Myanmar.

Most Burmese subscribe to Buddhism as a means of escape from suffering beyond the present life, at the same time clinging to the nat cultus as a means of escape from unpleasantness here and now. This dual conviction, however, carries with it an inherent conflict: the determinism associated with the Buddhist concept of karma and the prospect of changing one’s circumstances through propitiation of nats are fundamentally irreconcilable. To be consistent Buddhists, Burmese must accept the doctrine of karma: that their kan (past deeds) and kutho (merit and demerit resulting from their kan) are responsible for where they are now and where they will be in the next life. While karma offers the hope of escape from future suffering, it also insists that suffering in this life is the consequence of the karma of previous lives, hence present suffering is unavoidable.

On the other hand, the animistic tradition of the nat cultus lays on the nats the responsibility for present suffering, which in turn suggests the hope of relieving present suffering through their propitiation. Most Burmese are, therefore, presented with a dilemma, as each religious system, while conflicting with the other, holds out hope—Buddhism for a better future, the nat cultus for a better present. Spiro describes how they generally deal with this dilemma: rather than resolving the tension by repudiating either karma—and, with it, Buddhism proper—or the nat cultus, “the Burmese prefer to hold on to both its horns—they propitiate the nats and they remain Buddhist.”

In such practical outworkings in these and other Asian contexts can be seen the danger of embracing either a Pelagian model or a fatalistic distortion of Augustinianism—or both! Both of these extremes contrast sharply with Augustine’s conception of the human
will as enslaved by sin, with divine grace necessary in order to make possible the achievement of what that sinful will cannot achieve on its own. In these non-Christian systems, there is no concept of a gracious God saving sinful men and women in spite of their best efforts. Augustinianism alone offers that.

**Conclusion**

Harnack wrote, “Pelagian doctrine in its deepest roots is godless.” This is not to say that Pelagius and his allies were literally atheists, but that atheism is, in fact, the logical conclusion of their system. If we do not need God, he becomes superfluous: an interesting topic, perhaps, or an “invisible friend” in whom we confide, but not the God upon whom we depend for our very lives. How can one truly hunger and thirst in the absence of the incontestably felt need for food and drink? It is when we recognize our need for God, our absolute dependence on him, that we run to him, cling to him, and love him. This was the essence of Augustine’s theology of grace.

Pelagius was rightly concerned with the moral dimension of the Christian faith. He was justifiably disturbed by the blatant hypocrisy he witnessed among those who professed faith in Christ. However, in his appraisal of the causes for their behavior, he appealed to the arguments of those like Sextus and Rufinus who had no knowledge of or failed to appreciate the clear and compelling testimony for the primacy of God’s grace that is found throughout Scripture. As a result, he constructed a theology that offered a weak redefinition of grace as something other than the pivotal theological concept and overwhelming spiritual reality that Augustine knew it to be. While attributing to men and women the blame for failing to stand, thus taking a wholly biblical position with which Augustine would have agreed, Pelagius also attributed to them the moral ability so to stand, thus taking a position against which Augustine argued with all his might.

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47Quoted in Ferguson, *Pelagius*, 183.
Augustine agreed with Pelagius that fallen man is free. However, against Pelagius, he contended that in unregenerate men and women such freedom is constrained by the will to do only evil. God graciously initiates our salvation, and in so doing he makes us truly free. After responding to his grace by faith, we are still free to choose evil, yet we are also free to choose spiritual good. We are thus, at least in this respect, returned to the state of Adam prior to the Fall, being both *posse non peccare* and *posse peccare*. The culmination of this line of thought is that one day we will be *non posse peccare*; we will finally be freed from the vestiges of our sinful nature, and it will no longer be possible for us to sin. Pelagianism attempts to scale such heights on the strength of mere human ability, with nothing more than a cursory nod to the aid of grace. Augustine, acutely aware of his own abject failures and inadequacies, understood that it was by grace—indeed, by grace alone—that we can ever hope for eternal peace with God.