

HEROES + HERETICS

Alex Bunn considers Pelagius, Augustine and Ambrose

HERO 5: PELAGIUS, AUGUSTINE AND AMBROSE

Pelagius: champion of 'free will'

The location, North Africa. The time, early fifth century. And the villain this time is, in true Hollywood style, British. Pelagius was a monk, described by a contemporary as 'a fat dog stupefied with porridge'. But despite his reputation as a heretic, he did have a point. He was worried that our hero, Augustine, had undermined moral responsibility. He had read Augustine's *Confessions* and was incensed by this passage:

*'Give me the grace [O Lord] to do as you command, and command me to do what you will! . . . O holy God, when your commands are obeyed, it is from you that we receive the power to obey them.'*¹

Pelagius asked whether we have to wait for God to give us special power before we can do right. Wouldn't that be a bit fatalistic, a lazy excuse for sin? So he wrote *Defence of the freedom of the human will*² to promote Christian discipline. Quite rightly, Pelagius challenges us to resist sin. Didn't James command 'Resist the devil, and he will flee from you'?³ But Pelagius claimed that all men 'possess a free will unimpaired for sinning or not sinning'. We just



Pelagius

need to choose to obey God. Pelagius taught that we had complete freedom either way. But he was naïve about the seductive power of sin, and denied that we all inherit this weakness from Adam, something Augustine called original sin. How did

Augustine reach his conclusion? Surely the most influential saint between St Paul and Luther was not downplaying obedience? What was his view of sin?

Augustine: grace liberates us to love and enjoy God

Augustine knew all about it from very personal experience. Born to aspiring parents in 354 AD, they wanted to see him succeed as a public speaker, and lavished on him the best education in Carthage, in today's Tunisia. He had different intentions though, and immersed himself in 'a hissing cauldron of lust' – a typical university experience, then!

But over the years, he became miserable, and wanted more from life, and ultimately from God: 'I began to see the truth, I thrilled with love and dread alike, I realised I was far from you...and far off, I heard your voice saying I am the God



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who IS'. But he was unable to change: 'I was frantic, overcome by violent anger with myself for not accepting your will...I tore my hair and hammered my forehead with my fists; I locked my fingers and hugged my knees'.⁴

His knew that his heart was divided, still swayed by desires that distracted him from God: 'I was held back by mere trifles. . . They plucked at my garment of flesh and whispered, "Are you going to dismiss us? ... I began to search for a means of gaining the strength I needed to enjoy you.'

But how to love God wholeheartedly? He wasn't convinced by Pelagius' appeal to willpower. Now it is true that love is an act of the will, not of the emotions. But a cold form of religion that reduces love to a passionless choice leaves out something vital. Augustine knew he needed a love in his life that would triumph over the appetites that tormented him. One day he heard a voice tell him to pick up the Bible, and he turned randomly (don't try this at home!) and read from Romans, the first passage on which his eyes fell: 'Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh.'⁵ He realised he didn't



Augustine

just need forgiveness, but liberation from addiction. He argued that Pelagius' free will was a myth:

'During all those years [of rebellion], where was my free will? What was the hidden, secret place from which it was summoned in a

moment, so that I might

bend my neck to your easy yoke? How sweet all at once it was for me to be rid of *those fruitless joys* which I had once feared to lose! *You drove them from me*, you who are the true, the sovereign joy. You drove them from me and took their place, you who are sweeter than all pleasure.'⁶

Seeing grace as God's power to woo us back to him is still a revolutionary idea

Seeing grace as God's power to woo us back to him is still a revolutionary idea. Augustine said that we were created to desire God above all things: 'thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee'.⁷ But in our fallen state we no longer love as we should, and we actually have little power to change what delights us. Whether it is alcohol, pornography or popularity, what power do we have to change the object of our desires? Imagine someone who simply does not



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like fried liver and cabbage; how can they force themselves to like it as much as, say, gently warmed chocolate fudge cake? Yet God is by his very nature the highest, the most satisfying, the most delightful object of our affections, even if we just don't feel it. Imagine now the person who hates chocolate cake because to *him* it tastes like cat food. But this man lives on cat food because to *him* it tastes better: this man is sick and in need of help! According to Augustine, we are such people, addicted to unworthy things, which are a poor substitute for God himself. He saw that our problem is not just wrong choices, but blindness to beauty, and deadness to joy. Our desires are bent out of shape, and we need help.

Thankfully, our God is a God of grace. And grace is not just a means for forgiveness, but the power to mend us

If we are really blind to God's full glory, what hope is there? Thankfully, our God is a God of grace. And grace is not just a means for forgiveness, but the power to mend us. Romans says 'God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us'.⁸ He alone can turn our heads and hearts back to him, and help us appreciate true beauty, real excellence, the only worthy object of all our desires. Only God himself can drive from us the love of 'fruitless joys' by replacing them with a joy in him, sweeter than any other pleasure.

For Augustine, then, freedom is not 'balanced equipoise' between two moral options. Perhaps

you've been to ethics lectures where free will is venerated, and told that all things being equal, we make good and free choices. But things are not equal, as we are pulled this way by our wayward desires. We do not naturally *want* good. One might even ask whether God himself has free will to choose good over evil? Or whether we would want such a God who is quite uncommitted to good or evil before making a free choice. Does God not in fact always do the right thing, the loving thing, without exception? For Augustine, true free will is to be so in love with God and his ways that the very experience of choice is transcended. Augustine saw the self-conscious weighing up of choices not as a sign of free will, but rather as a symptom of sick hearts. Dutiful and reluctant obedience is a necessary chore only in this fallen world. In the next world our delight and pleasure in God will be so complete that to choose against him will be unimaginable.

So Augustine was not loose on morality, as Pelagius supposed. He just knew its proper place. 'Give me a man in love: he knows what I mean. Give me one who yearns; give me one who is hungry; give me one far away in this desert, who is thirsty and sighs for the spring of the Eternal country. Give me that sort of man: he knows what I mean. But if I speak to a cold man, he just does not know what I am talking about.'⁹

Augustine's jealous love, holy desire, and 'sober intoxication' with the Lord drove him to take on this historic fight with Pelagius even in his seventies. Today we still need to hear Augustine's voice above those who would reduce Christianity to moral rearmament, an ethical system of dutiful drudgery.

Ambrose: church above state?

I should also mention the great bishop Ambrose, who discipled and baptised Augustine. He was a brave man who rebuked the nominally Christian Roman Emperor Theodosius, who had massacred 7,000 rioters in Thessalonica in AD 390.



Ambrose refused to admit him to church and communion, the first high profile 'excommunication'. Ambrose told him 'the emperor is in the church and not over it', and ordered him to humble himself like King David. Theodosius performed a very public penance for several months, even waiting in the snow outside Ambrose's office. Imagine, the most powerful statesman on earth recognising his authority was only on loan. We could do with such humility in government today!

But later, the church's use of state power would bring Christ's name into disrepute. Sadly, even our hero Augustine was seduced by the use of force. Initially he thought that 'no-one should be coerced into the unity of Christ'. In fact he wrote

a hugely influential book about the limitations of a Christian state, *The City of God*, especially in view of the imminent collapse of the old Roman empire. He argued that it is impossible in this life to separate reliably those who serve God and the 'city above' from those whose loyalties are

earthbound. But later he changed his mind on compelling Christian worship. He said he was convinced by one of Christ's parables in Luke, in which the king said of his wedding guests 'compel them to come in',¹⁰ at least in a Latin version. Had not God used force against Paul in his conversion? Alternatively, he may have been persuaded by the sheer success of persecution against certain sects, and lamentably the Jews. Either way, the church and state would be inseparable for centuries to come in Europe, and the church would come to be seen as being principally an agent of social control, enforcing public morals and a self-serving agenda. How far from its founder's example, who relinquished power, and demonstrated servant leadership! ■

I am indebted to John Piper, whose inspiring biographies of many Christian heroes can be downloaded as free MP3s at:

www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/biographies/the-swan-is-not-silent/print#

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