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12-15-2004

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Recommended Citation
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A Heretic Reconsidered

Pelagius, Augustine, And "Original Sin"

Craig St. Clair
Graduate Paper I
December 15, 2004

The real issue was original sin.[1]

This observation stands as the first sentence of John Ferguson's final paragraph in his 1952 study of Pelagius. It is an odd statement given that Ferguson has just finished 184 pages of historical analysis and nowhere alludes to where he will eventually leave his reader. Subsequent scholars have paid little attention to this intriguing statement. None the less, Ferguson's intuition about original sin is accurate. It will be the burden of this paper to illustrate that original sin became *the* issue in the Pelagian controversy and that the teaching of Pelagius was behind this opposition. However, this was not a frontal attack on a formalized doctrine of original sin: at the time no such doctrine existed.[2] Rather, what we see in Pelagius is a resolute opposition to any kind of theological determinism. This theological determinism took the form of the doctrine of *tradux peccati*, or the transmission of sin, which was a key element in a growing climate of determinism that was coming into being in the circles to which Pelagius had access. Augustine's formulation of a formal doctrine of original sin was highly deterministic, thus making original sin the central issue around which the Pelagian controversy revolved.

Throughout the discussion I will focus on two texts in particular: Pelagius's *Letter to Demetrias* and his commentary on the epistles of St. Paul. The latter is of special importance because the text predates any controversy and allows us to glimpse the

[1] John Ferguson, Pelagius (Cambridge, England: W. Heffer & Sons Ltc, 1956) 184.

[2] B. R. Rees, *Pelagius: A Reluctant Heretic* (Wolfeboro, NH: The Boydell Press, 1988) 27.

mind of Pelagius outside of any immediate polemical motivations or defenses.[3] It will be impossible to get too deeply into a discussion of Pelagius without bringing in St. Augustine of Hippo. Much of what we know to be the work of Pelagius is preserved in extensive quotations within Augustine's writings, particularly in his *De Natura et Gratia*. The danger of bringing in Augustine in relation to Pelagius is that he looms so large in this (and nearly every) controversy that one risks overemphasizing Augustine's points—which so often missed Pelagius's point. It is my express desire to let Pelagius and his teaching speak for themselves and bring in Augustine only to contrast with Pelagius. It is, however, a paradoxical fact that there would have been no Pelagian controversy without Augustine continually pressing his case against Pelagius, thus some elucidation of Augustine's essential critique of Pelagius will be necessary.

It is, as I have alluded to above, a misnomer to speak of original sin prior to the Pelagian controversy. It was Augustine who coined the phrase in his letter to Simplicius and before this we can only speak of the fragmentary elements of which the doctrine would be comprised. I will use "original sin" (in quotation marks) to refer the partial existence of the doctrine in its varying degrees throughout the paper. Original sin (without quotation marks) will be reserved for Augustine's usage of the term. It was ultimately the absence of such a formalized doctrine that made the Pelagian controversy a controversy at all.

The actual facts of Pelagius's historical existence are few and far between. There is some evidence of his being of British origin, and of a family background that would have allowed him an education involving, at the very least, Latin and Greek, and

[3] This is a point of common agreement of many scholars. However, it seems that Pelagius had polemical motivations in many of his writings.

very possibly a full classical education. Scholars speculate that he was training for a professional career (perhaps medicine or law) before he adopted his self-professed Christian asceticism. Pelagius's confirmed ascetic life also suggests a possible influence of some form of monastic life. Most of his life in Rome was spent among the Roman Christian aristocracy who supported his existence.[4] Once the barbarians invaded Rome, Pelagius fled to North Africa and then on to Jerusalem where he attempted to lead a more formal monastic existence, but the ensuing Pelagian controversy and the intense criticism of St. Jerome forced him into a sort of exile where he was never heard from again.

First Contact

Pelagius and Augustine first came into contact with one another in a very telling way in 405.[5] The event involved Pelagius's reaction to a public recitation of the final book of Augustine's *Confessions* when he heard the quotation, "Give what You command, and command what You will." The incident is recalled by Augustine himself:

> Which words of mine, Pelagius at Rome, when they were mentioned in his presence by a certain brother and fellow bishop of mine, could not bear; and contradicting somewhat too excitedly, nearly came to quarrel with him who had mentioned them.[6]

Augustine was not present at the incident so he is relying on second hand information, likely provided by persons sympathetic to Augustine's own theological stance. His telling of the event also betrays much of what we know to be the character of Pelagius

[4] It is unclear what Pelagius actually did for the families that supported him. One can only assume some form of education, perhaps catechetical, was involved given his own education. One, however, is left to speculate given the scant evidence.

[5] Ferguson, 47.

[6] Augustine, A Treatise on the Gift of Perseverance, Chapter 53 [XX]. Internet document: http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/15122.htm. Accessed: 7/23/04.

himself, which was not violent tempered or given to public disagreement. This incident reveals perhaps Pelagius's most deeply held conviction: his virulent opposition to any form of determinism that undermined a person's free will. This event is central to understanding Pelagius's view of "original sin." Historian Peter Brown also saw the significance of this event:

> This one book of the *Confessions* marks the parting of ways. Augustine, in a scrupulous examination of his abiding weaknesses, in his evocation of the life-long convalescence of the converted Christian, had tacitly denied that it was ever possible for a man to slough off his past: neither baptism nor the experience of conversion could break the monotonous continuity of a life that was 'one long temptation'. In so doing, Augustine had abandoned a great tradition of Western Christianity. It was Pelagius who had seized the logical conclusions of this tradition: he is the last, most radical and the most paradoxical exponent of the ancient Christianity—the Christianity of discontinuity.[7]

Not only did Brown see this event as significant in the life of Pelagius but also as a turning point in the history of Western Christendom! I do not think it an understatement to say that this single event captures the essence of what the Pelagian controversy was about for Pelagius, as well as revealing his distaste for any kind of theological determinism (Augustine's issues are another matter altogether).

The Climate of Determinism

While this incident is important in understanding what motivated Pelagius, one quotation is hardly enough to evoke the kind of response he displayed. This incident took place in a broader climate of determinism that seemed to be taking hold, at least in the circles within which Pelagius traveled. There were two other key aspects of this climate of determinism for Pelagius: that of Manichaeism and the issue of the *tradux peccati*.

[7] Peter Brown, "Pelagius and his Supporters," The Journal of Theological Studies 14:1 (April 1968) 107

The work of theologian Torgny Bohlin on Pelagius' Pauline Commentaries has revealed that his two principal concerns were the Arian and Manichaean heresies.[8] In reflection on Bohlin's work, G. I. Bonner observes that:

> It is these two heresies, and especially the latter, which condition his approach and cause him, when speaking of Grace, to have constantly in mind Manichaean dualism, which declares evil to be a substance and the created world evil, and Manichaean determinism, which declares sin to be inevitable, since it is merely the operation of the evil principle within us.[9]

The concern over Manichaeism is important to Pelagius largely due to his contact with the Roman Christian aristocracy where Manichaeism was an attractive influence: we have only to recall the experience of Augustine in his early years to verify this fact. Thus, Pelagius needed to formulate his teaching to respond to the influences and presuppositions of his audience. It would also seem, given Pelagius's emphasis on these two points, that Manichaean dualism and determinism, or some form thereof, had taken root in the hearts and minds of his wealthy Roman audience.

Another principle aspect of this climate of determinism was the discussion of the *tradux peccati*, or the issue of the inheritance of sin. The discussion of the possibility of sin being inherited came via the Originist controversy concerning the origins of the soul. The traducian view in this controversy asserted that the soul was passed on to the child from the parents, while the creationist view taught that in one way or another, whether immediately or from the beginning of time, God created each individual soul. The *tradux peccati* debate was a sub-text of the traducian view.

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[8] Robert F. Evans, Pelagius: Inquires and Reappraisals (New York, NY: The Seabury Press, 1968) 103, 119.

[9] G. I. Bonner, "How Pelagian was Pelagius: An Examination of the Contentions of Torgny Bohlin," Studia Patristica 9, (1966) 353.

While much of the Originist controversy took place on the soil of Eastern Christendom, it was through Rufinus the Syrian that the discussion and issues came west. Theodore De Bruyn, in the introduction to his translation of Pelagius's commentary on Romans handily summarizes the role Rufinus played:

> What Rufinus of Syria objected to in the traducianist view was the notion of hereditary sin associated with it: the belief that the whole human race inherits the sin of the first human beings, and that on account of this inherited sin unbaptized infants are damned. To him it was a contradiction of the justice and omnipotence of God, and of free will and accountability of each human being, to assert that because of the sin of Adam and Eve all people are guilty of sin. He held that the fall did not so vitiate human nature that people are unable not to sin, and cited evidence from Scripture that after the fall Adam and Eve and others in fact did not sin. The common human condition of physical mortality is indeed result of the fall; the bodies obeyed the command of God. But it is not a punishment for sin, since it is visited even on the righteous. Rather it is a means to restrain evil and eventually to release one from the struggle with evil in this life.[10]

Here we see both the content and the origin of some of the ideas that Pelagius was acquainted with and to some degree appropriated in his own teaching

Caelestius, a follower of Rufinus and an acquaintance of Pelagius, is often credited with pushing the *tradux peccati* to the forefront of controversy. In 411 Caelestius had applied to become a presbyter in Carthage, but instead was charged with heresy on several counts. The Council of Carthage charged him on six points: he was accused of holding that one, Adam was mortal; two, Adam's sin affected only himself and not the rest of the human race; three, infants are born in a prelasparian state; four, Adam's sin and death do not cause all to die any more than the resurrection of Christ causes all to rise; five, the law and the gospel are equally salvific; and six, there were sinless men prior to Christ.[11] Caelestius is responsible for firing the first shot

[10] Pelagius, Pelagius's commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans: Translated with Introduction and Notes,Theodore De Bruyn, trans. (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1993) 19.

[11] Eugene TeSelle, "Rufinius the Syrian, Caelestius, Pelagius: Explorations in the Prehistory of the Pelagian Controversy," Augustinian Studies 3 (1972) 61.

in the Pelagian controversy, and the above mentioned charges reveal how central the issue of *tradux peccati* was to the Pelagian controversy. We will see below that Pelagius himself essentially accepted the creationist view and rejected the traducian implications of the *tradux peccati*.

Rufinus of Syria, Caelestius, and Pelagius all, in varying degrees, were reacting to this climate of determinism as it manifested itself through the *tradux peccati*. It was the ascendancy of this doctrine combined with the specter of Manichaeism that seems to have motivated Pelagius in his teaching and writing.

The Teaching of Pelagius

It is to the actual teaching of Pelagius that we now turn. I will discuss Pelagius's fundamental theological presuppositions and his understanding of sin before exploring his thoughts on the sin of Adam and its effects on the human race. As I briefly mentioned above, two theological principles informed the entirety of Pelagius's teaching: the goodness of creation and the freedom of the will. The latter is well known and is the traditional hallmark of Pelagian teaching, and I assume will need no explanation or argument. The former, however is often overlooked in discussions about Pelagius and I hope to establish the importance of the former principle for Pelagius. The importance of the goodness of creation for Pelagius is revealed clearly in his famous *Letter to Demetrias* in his discussion of human nature. At the outset of the letter Pelagius gives some explanation of his method of approach when offering spiritual advice. He tells us that "when I have to discuss the principles of right conduct and the leading of a holy life, I usually begin by showing the strength and characteristics of

human nature."[12] He continues, "The procedure I have followed in other exhortations should, I believe, be especially observed in this one."[13] Pelagius then further explains how he comes to this conclusion about human nature:

> The first way to form a judgment of the goodness of human nature is from God, its creator. He made the whole world and all the extremely good things in it. How much more excellent, then did he make the human beings, for whose sake he established everything else. The goodness of humanity was indicated even before it was created when God prepared it in his image and likeness.[14]

Pelagius goes on to reflect upon the rest of creation in relation to the central place humanity holds therein. It is important to note that he begins his assessment of the goodness of human nature with the creative power of God. As Pelagius himself has already stated, this is a standard approach in his teaching and must be born in mind throughout the remainder of our discussion, for his critics, both ancient and modern, have charged him with taking God out of the picture of Christian discipleship – clearly this was not the case.

"Sin and the Sin of Adam"

Pelagius had a clear and precise notion of sin. While there may have been discussions taking place on the possibilities of sin being passed from person to person or being inherited, Pelagius would have none of this. He saw sin exclusively as an action of the will. A specific concern was to guard against a tendency to see sin as a substance or a thing that could be passed on, as the *tradux peccati* discussion directly implied.[15] We find the most straight forward statement of this view from Pelagius's lost

[12] Pelagius, Theological Anthropology, J. Patout Burns, trans. & ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981) 40.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid, 41.

[15] Ferguson, 67.

work *De Natura*, which Augustine has cited in his *De Natura et Gratia*. Augustine responded to him in 415 and seems to have not wasted time in his reply. Pelagius begins a discussion of whether or not our nature has been weakened by sin when he states: "I think…that before all other things we have to inquire what sin is, --some substance, or wholly a name without substance, whereby is expressed not a thing, not an existence, not some sort of a body, but the doing of a wrongful deed."[16] Thus for Pelagius sin is entirely an action and not a thing as he is concerned some thinks.[17]

This definition of sin also carries into his thoughts on "original sin." We find that Pelagius is aware of the differing opinions around the *tradux peccati* debate in his commentary on Romans 5:15. His comments are essentially three-fold and no personal ownership is taken for any of the opinions put forth. Pelagius's Pauline commentaries proceed with each verse followed by his own commentary, and following the text of Romans 5:15[18] he remarks:

> …because Adam killed only himself and his own descendents, but Christ freed both those who at that time were in the body and the following generations. But those who oppose the transmission of sin try to assail it as follows: 'If Adam's sin', they say, 'harmed even those who were not sinners, then Christ's righteousness helps even those who are not believers. For he says that in like manner, or rather to an even greater degree are people saved through the one than and previously perished through the other. [19]

Pelagius seems to think this is a weak argument when he says they "try to assail it" and the *reductio ad absurdum* nature of the argument would support this view. There

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[16] Augustine, On Nature and Grace, Ch 21 [XIX]. Internet document: http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/NPNF1-05/npnf1-05-16.htm#P1888_814447 . Accessed on 5/25/02. Hereafter known as NG.

[17] It is interesting to note here how keenly aware Pelagius was of what was at stake in this discussion, that being the very definition of sin itself

[18] De Bruyn, 94. The text of Romans 5:15: "But the gift is not like the trespass. Fir if many died by the trespass of the one, ho much more has God's grace and the gift in the grace of the one person Jesus Christ overflowed to more."

[19] De Bruyn, 94

seems to be an emphasis on going to one absurd extreme ("Christ's righteousness helps even those who are not believers") to bring to light the perceived absurdity of believing that one's sin can be transmitted to someone who had not sinned. Note also that Pelagius's definition of sin seems also to be operative in the opinions he is presenting. The statement "If Adam's sin…harmed even those who were not sinners" suggests that someone else's sin cannot be attributed to one who has not himself committed a sin, thus viewing sin as an act and not a thing.

The second part of the objections he lays out concerns an interesting observation concerning baptism if we keep in mind the logic of the *tradux peccati*. Pelagius states:

> Secondly, they say: 'If baptism washes away that ancient sin, those who have been born of two baptized parents should not have this sin, for they could not have passed on to their children what they themselves in no wise possessed. Besides, if the soul does not exist by transmission but the flesh alone, then only the flesh carries the transmission of and it alone deserves punishment.[20]

Augustine himself states at one point that those he considers Pelagians advancing such arguments have "strong and active minds."[21] This is one of the most fascinating challenges to the logic of inherited sin that was gaining ascendancy and seemed to be supported by Augustine. The logic of the objection seems to be impeccable: how can someone pass on some-*thing* which the sacrament of baptism has apparently cleansed them of? It would seem that if one believed that baptism forgave *all* sin (as the Church did at this point in time), then how could one believe that the child of baptized parents could be tainted by the transmitted sin from their parents? Either the baptism didn't take, or this transmitted sin would seem to be able to overpower the effects of the baptism. Neither Pelagius (and those who held the opinions he is conveying), nor

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[20] Ibid.

[21] Augustine, NG, Ch. 6.

Augustine saw these possibilities as tenable; thus, it would seem that either the Pelagians and these opinions or the version of the *tradux peccati* supported by Augustine would have to go.

The third aspect of Pelagius's comments is more a conclusion of the previous statements rather than introducing a new point; however, the substance of the conclusion is worthy of note:

> [Thus,] declaring it to be unjust that a soul which is born today, not from the lump of Adam, bears so ancient a sin belonging to another, they say that on no account should it be granted that God, who forgives [a person] his own sins, imputes to him another's.[22]

The most significant aspect of this conclusion is the use of the phrase "not from the lump of Adam." This phrase and other phrases like it are employed by Augustine throughout his anti-Pelagian writings and is a key aspect of his own understanding of Romans 5:12.[23] The comment is also directly opposed not only to the *tradux peccati* but also to the traducian view of the soul's origin from which the *tradux peccati* sub text is taken. We see again Pelagius's own very clear view of sin reiterated in the final statement. The value Pelagius places on the freedom of the will in not wanting to accept any sort of deterministic imputed sinfulness is also evident.

All of these opinions however are presented as opinions that are "out there" and Pelagius nowhere claims any of them as his own. It is impossible to definitively determine whether or not Pelagius did fully support any of these views. All of the comments do share his view of sin and Pelagius does take the time to actually lay out

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[22] De Bruyn, 94.

[23] De Bruyn, 92. "Therefore, just as through one person sin came into the world, and through sin death. And so death passed on to all people, in that all sinned." It is important to note that DeBruyn chose to translate this passage different from Augustine's understanding: "in that all sinned" rather than "in whom all sinned." This is more consonant with Pelagius's understanding of the issue.

the differing opinions within his own commentary. He could have chosen not to do so, or to explicitly disavow the opinions. The fact that he included lengthy statements of these opinions leads one to conclude that he saw them as significant for one reason or another; that they also share his view of sin leads one to believe that these opinions were very possibly shared by Pelagius and that he was assuming the stance of a teacher toward his students in his use of these opinions.

Several other key texts get us closer to the actual thoughts of Pelagius on this issue of "original sin." His comment on the soon-to-be famous passage of Romans 5:12 reveals the essence of how he views the transmission of sin. Pelagius breaks the verse into two parts, commenting separately on each.

> *Therefore, just as through one person sin came into the world, and through sin death.* By example or by pattern. Just as through Adam sin came at a time when it did not yet exist, so in the same way through Christ righteousness was recovered at a time when it survived in almost no one. And just as through the former's sin death came in, so also through the latter's righteousness life was regained.[24]

Pelagius's immediate response to the above passage is revealing. He understands the passage to be concerning the *tradux peccati*, physicalist transmission of sin from one person to another—which is not necessarily how the passage must be read. Sin did not necessarily need to come into the world via this form of transmission. Yet his response of "By example or by pattern" is his essential articulation of how he views Adam's sin to have an effect on the rest of humanity. He is stating, if not fully articulating, an alternative view of how sin came into the world through one person's sin.

The second part of the verse is an elaboration on the view stated in the first part.

> *And so death passed on to all people, in that all sinned*. As long as they sin the same way, they likewise die. For death did not pass on to Abraham and Isaac [and Jacob], [concerning whom the Lord says: 'Truly they are all living' [Luke 20:38]. But here he says all are dead because in a multitude of sinners no exception is made for

[24] De Bruyn, 92. Text in italics denotes scriptural citations in the commentary unless otherwise noted.

> a few righteous. So also, elsewhere: 'There is not one who does good, not even one' (Ps. 13:1; cf. Rom. 3:12), [and 'every] one a liar' (Rom. 3:4). Or: Death passed on to all who lived in a human, [and] not a heavenly, fashion.[25]

Pelagius here expands what he means when he said "By example or pattern." Adam has provided a prototype for what sin is, and when we sin like Adam we also die like him. Key to Pelagius's understanding of this passage is how he understands the statement "in that all sinned." The focus is less on the person of Adam and more on the sin that he committed. This is consistent with the text of Scripture he is using, whereas Augustine had access to a different translation from the Greek than Pelagius. What is remarkable is that Pelagius's understanding of this passage is consistent with the text itself, which does not allow for the kind of understanding that Augustine employed.

This is also the famous phrase that Augustine rendered very differently. Augustine was reading this phrase as "in whom all sinned." Pelagius seemingly had some facility with Greek and could likely have been reading the Scripture in Greek as he was writing his commentary in Latin, though conclusive evidence on this point eludes us. We will address Augustine's understanding of this text and his response to Pelagius and the ensuing controversy below.

One final text serves as yet another elaboration upon what Pelagius has laid down concerning the transmission of sin in Romans 5:12. In his *Letter to Demetrias* he articulates further how this example or pattern of sinning can affect subsequent human beings after Adam. Pelagius has begun his first proof of the goodness of human nature by stating that prior to the Mosaic Law humans existed and flourished and that human nature itself was an "adequate" law in itself to maintain humanity through this era:

[25] De Bruyn, 92-93.

> Thus, as long as the exercise of the recently created nature continued to thrive and the long practice of sinning had not shrouded human reason like a god, nature was left without a law. Once it had been covered over by vices and corroded by the rust of ignorance, the Lord applied the law like a file to polish nature by repeated correction and restore it original luster. Doing good has become difficult for us only because of the long custom of sinning, which begins to infect us even in our childhood. Over the years it gradually corrupts us, building an addiction and then holding us bound with what seems like the force of nature itself. All the years during which we were negligently reared and were trained in the vices, during which we even labored at evil, during which the attractions of wickedness made innocence seem foolish, all these years now rise up against us. They come out against us, and the old practice battles the new decision. After we have labored so long to learn wickedness, are we then surprised that sanctity is not mysteriously bestowed upon us while we remain idle and at ease without working to build good customs?[26]

Augustine is often credited with being more existentially in touch with the human experience of sin (as undoubtedly he was!) than Pelagius, or the reflection on human sinfulness he offers here seems equally profound as well as being experientially or psychologically accurate to a degree rarely attributed to Pelagius.[27] Pelagius gives us here a remarkably systematic account of how humanity has become sinful. Above in the first part of his comment on Romans 5:12, he tells us it is by "example or pattern;" here he gives an insightful account of how humanity has incorporated the "example or pattern" of Adam.

Several key points concerning Pelagius's view of the sin of Adam need to be brought to the fore. First, sin is almost entirely external to human nature, which is created good by God. Human nature is not essentially compromised by sin since it is God who has created it. Second, sin comes to adhere to human nature as does rust to metal. Human nature then is compromised to some degree by sin as metal is compromised to some degree by the rust that corrodes it. Pelagius is vulnerable here because he wants very much to protect human nature from any essential damage, but

[26] Burns, 50.

[27] Some article at the end that attributes our desires of discipleship to Pelagius but the reality of our situation to Augustine.

his recognition that the accumulation of sin in some way hampers and inhibits human nature would seem to have warded against Augustine's charges of an inadequate understanding of sin.[28] Pelagius does also employ a medical analogy when he remarks that that this habit of sinning can even "infect" us in early childhood. This is consonant with his basic understanding of sin in the rust analogy where sin affects human nature but does not essentially corrupt it. Pelagius goes on to acknowledge that sin can affect human nature to such a degree that it actually takes on the character of an "addiction" and even the "force of nature" itself. His use of the phrase "force of nature" here is important because he is acknowledging the experiential situation his —particularly Augustine— opponents are attempting to articulate. Yet this comment is addressed to the likes of Augustine and others within the Church who advocate an all too physicalistic and deterministic view of sin.[29] Pelagius concludes by explaining that sanctity is a hard-won battle and not a magical gift one receives upon entering the Church. Thus, we have a fairly complete picture of how Pelagius views sin and how the sin of Adam affects the human race.

The circumstantial evidence for Pelagius's rejection of the transmission of sin as it was understood by those holding to the traducian view of the soul and a *tradux peccati* understanding of sin seems obvious by now. While Pelagius himself never explicitly claims these views as his own as we saw in his commentary on Romans 5:15, Augustine read the commentary and concluded (as I have as well) that Pelagius did in

[29] In the previous section of the letter Pelagius anticipates his opponents by remarking that "Someone might try to reverse the argument [for the goodness of human nature] and assert that the wickedness of some people shows that the blame [for sin] falls upon nature itself. To block such a response, I will use the scriptural evidence which holds sinners responsible for the evil actions of the will and does not excuse them through some natural determinism."

fact hold the views he attributed to others and began to believe Pelagius to be disingenuous about his own views. Let us now turn to Augustine.

Augustine Enters the Fray

This section will focus on Augustine's articulation of a deterministic doctrine of original sin as a near perfect expression of all that Pelagius had fought against. While one could spill much ink on Augustine's view of original sin as it came to be, I will focus on his use of Romans 5:12 as his principal means of addressing Pelagius's view of "original sin" and its deterministic nature. We will see also how Augustine was on the opposite side of the traducian issue from Pelagius, with his implicit assumptions of the soul being passed on physically from parent to child in his view of sin being contracted like a disease by an infant from its parents. Even with this narrowed focus, I will necessarily limit myself to only the most essential of texts that represent Augustine's view as it came to be.

The historical record of Augustine's participation in the Pelagian controversy supports my epigram from Ferguson and my thesis that original sin was at heart of the Pelagian controversy. The Pelagian controversy first enters the historical record in 412 with the Council of Carthage and Celestius as discussed above. At about the same time, Augustine, while not at the council, was addressed by a Marcellinus who had written to him concerning some of the views of Pelagius expressed in his Pauline commentaries, particularly the passages concerning Romans 5:12 discussed above. It is with this letter that we will begin to look at the views of Augustine and his criticism of Pelagius.

Augustine reveals his own understanding of Romans 5:12 as he begins to address Pelagius's understanding of the verse. Throughout the letter Augustine does not mention the name of Pelagius and refers more broadly to the circulation of Pelagian ideas. Augustine's response to Pelagius's comments on Romans 5:12 are worth quoting in full:

> You tell me in your letter, that they endeavor to twist into some new sense the passage of the apostle, in which he says: "By one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin;" yet you have not informed me what they suppose to be the meaning of these words. But so far as I have discovered from others, they think that the death which is here mentioned is not the death of the body, which they will not allow Adam to have deserved by his sin, but that of the soul, which takes place in actual sin; and that this actual sin has not been transmitted from the first man to other persons by natural descent, but by imitation. Hence, likewise, they refuse to believe that in infants original sin is remitted through baptism, for they contend that no such original sin exists at all in people by their birth.[30]

Here in this quotation we have contained all of the essential issues Augustine will take with Pelagius and Pelagian ideas. First, he addresses the issue of death which Celestius raised in Carthage, but does not seem to have been of much concern to Pelagius and won't be discussed here. He also raises the issue of the nature of Adam's sin and how this could be transmitted to us. Directly related to this is the issue of infant baptism and why infants are baptized at all; Augustine's contention is that they are tainted with original sin. Thus, the third significant aspect of the above quotation is the introduction of the issue of infant baptism into the discussion. This issue is of little to no concern to Pelagius as his focus is largely upon educating and forming adult Christians. Thus the ground is laid for Augustine's offensive in the Pelagian controversy.

[30] Augustine, On the Merits and Forgiveness of Sins, and on the Baptism of Infants, Book I, Ch. 9. Internet document: http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1501.htm. Accessed: 6/7/02. Hereafter known as MB.

Augustine picks up the remainder of the quotation of the verse in the following two chapters of the letter and more fully reveals his interpretation of original sin by making a key distinction between actual and original. Augustine begins chapter 11 with the following pronouncement: "Again, in the clause which follows, "In which all have sinned," how cautiously, rightly, and unambiguously is the statement expressed!"[31] He is unabashedly confident of the correctness of his interpretation of the verse. He goes on to draw the distinction between actual and original sin in the following way:

> "In which [sin] all have sinned" it is surely clear enough, that the sins which are peculiar to every man, which they themselves commit and which belong simply to them, mean one thing; and that the one sin, in and by which all have sinned means another thing; since all were that one man.[32]

His understanding of original sin is coming to the fore: actual sin is clear enough in that it involves wrongful deeds that individuals actually commit. Augustine is here referring to humanity as being united to Adam in this first of sins. But it seems to be more than a mere unity as he says, "all were that one man." Augustine concludes this chapter of the letter by stating that "The apostle…has declared concerning the first man, that "in him all have sinned;" and yet there is still a contest about the propagation of sin, and men opposed to it I know not what nebulous theory of imitation."[33]

Two issues remain undiscussed at this point: the issue concerning the transmission of sin from person to person and anthropological assumptions that seem to underlie the entire view of original sin. Over the course of the next several chapters Augustine weaves together his view of the transmission of sin. He poses the question: "Why did death reign on account of the sin of one, unless it was that men were bound

[31] Augustine, MB, Book I, Ch. 11.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid.

by the chain of death in that one man in whom all men sinned, even though they added no sins of their own?"[34] Thus, natural birth creates a "chain of death" whereby we inherit this sin. He confirms this in saying, "whilst by the generation of the flesh only that sin is contracted which is original…."[35] But what is the nature of this sin that is contracted? Augustine at the end of the letter introduces the notion of a "sinful flesh" which is permeated by "concupiscence."[36] He likens this to the "law of sin" mentioned by St. Paul. But is this concupiscence somehow sin? There seems to be such a strong correlation between the two in Augustine's discussion that it leaves the reader to wonder. Augustine confirms the suspicion in his response to Pelagius's *De Natura* when he is discussing works of the flesh and remarks that all such works "proceed from carnal concupiscence – in a word, from sin…."[37] If sin and carnal concupiscence are not directly associated in the thought of Augustine, then they are so closely associated as to be virtually interchangeable. It is this contamination of the flesh that is transmitted simply by virtue of being human.

It is no secret that Augustine for much of his life had a low estimation of human nature. While in other writings he does acknowledge the created goodness of human nature prior to the fall, the violence done to human nature by the sin of Adam seems to be nearly irrevocable.[38] Even the post-baptismal Christian burdened with carnal concupiscence seems to have great difficulty in avoiding sin and doing the good.

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[34] Ibid, ch. 17.

[35] Ibid, ch. 20

[36] Ibid, ch 70.

[37] On Nature and Grace, ch 66.

[38] It is important to recall the quotation from Peter Brown from the earlier in our discussion where he clearly perceives Augustine's inability to acknowledge much of any progress in grace for the converted, baptized Christian.

Augustine expressed this as “a certain necessary tendency to sin” due to the “defects that have entered our nature”[39] He elsewhere refers to humanity as an “entire mass,”[40] reducing the human family to a thing. Following these assumptions led him to conclude that infants would be condemned to hell: “It may therefore be correctly affirmed, that such infants as quit the body without being baptized will be involved in the mildest condemnation of all.”[41] While his logic on this issue may be correct, his charity and his ability to imagine the depths of the grace of God are sorely lacking. Augustine goes on to reflect further upon the role and status of these damned infants and the justice of their punishment. This low estimation of human nature, especially the deterministic leaning toward an inability to avoid sin or the condemnation upon a newborn baby to be guilty of hell provoked Pelagius in his “first contact” and ran deeply contrary to what he believed about human nature.

Augustine and Pelagius Reconsidered

Augustine clearly thought he was in the right on this issue and was articulating the ancient faith stemming back to St. Paul himself. But was he? There seems to be enough evidence to suggest that he was not as right as he thought he was. When we contrast Augustine’s understanding of original sin with the traditional Eastern Orthodox perspective we find Pelagius to be less heretical than one usually suspects— in fact we don’t find him to be heretical at all on the issue of original sin. Modern Orthodox theologian John Meyendorff sheds an interesting light onto this issue. He introduces his

[39] Augustine, NG, ch 79.

[40] On nature and grace, chs 5 & 9.

[41] Ibid, ch. 21.

subject as follows: “In order to understand many major theological problems which arose between East and West, both before and after the schism, the extraordinary impact upon Western thought of Augustine’s polemics against Pelagius…must be fully taken into account. [42] Meyendorff not only sees importance here concerning the issue of original sin but also for relations between Eastern and Western Christians. First there is a profound issue with the way Augustine was interpreting Romans 5:12; second, many Eastern fathers of the Church sound remarkably “Pelagian” in their thoughts concerning sin and the sin of Adam.

Augustine had access to the scriptural texts in Latin and at the time there were several Latin translations circulating in Western Christendom.[43] It seems a common Latin mistranslation of Romans 5:12 was in rendering the end of the verse “in whom all men have sinned,” which has a different meaning in the Greek.

> In this passage there is a major issue of translation. The last four Greek words were translated in Latin as *in quo omnes peccaverunt* (in whom [ie, in Adam] all men have sinned), and this translation was used in the West to justify the doctrine of guilt inherited from Adam and spread to his descendants. But such a meaning cannot be drawn from the original Greek—the text read, of course, by the Byzantines. The form *eph ho*—a contraction of *epi* with the relative pronoun *ho* – can be translated as “because,” a meaning accepted by most modern scholars of all confessional backgrounds. Such a translation renders Paul’s thought to mean that death, which was “the wages of sin” (Rm. 6:23) for Adam, is also the punishment applied to those who, like him, sin. It presupposes a cosmic significance of the sin of Adam, but does not say that his descendents are “guilty” as he was, unless they also sin as he sinned.[44]

This gets at the heart of Augustine’s error and, I believe, much of what was at issue between Pelagius and Augustine. It is difficult to know if Pelagius was operating with

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[42] John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends & Doctrinal Themes* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1974) 143.

[43] Recall that he and Pelagius are said to have been using different translations of the same scriptural texts in question in our discussion.

[44] Meyendorff, 144.

the same translation as Augustine — the modern text of Pelagius's Pauline commentaries bears the traditional Latin translation stated above, however his interpretation seems to bear more resemblance to the Eastern understanding of the passage.[45]

Other Eastern fathers also did not adhere to a traducian understanding of the transmission of sin. St. John Chrysostom— a near contemporary of Augustine—in his homily on Romans 5: 12 at several points asks questions or makes remarks that reveal his view of sin as personal act and not something contracted from another. "For that one man should be punished on account of another does not seem to be much in accordance with reason,"[46] and "For the fact that when he [Adam] had sinned and become mortal, those who were of him should be so also, is nothing unlikely. But how would it follow that from his disobedience another would be come a sinner?"[47] We find a more explicit denial of inherited sin in Theodoret of Cyrus in a passage concerning infant baptism. Meyendorff relays the following:

> "If the only meaning of baptism were the remission of sins why…would we baptize the newborn children who have not yet tasted of sin? But the mystery [of baptism] is not limited to this; it is a promise of greater and more perfect gifts. In it are the promises of future delights; it is a type of the future resurrection, a communion with the master's passion, a participation in His resurrection, a mantle of salvation , a tunic of gladness, a garment of light, or, rather, it is light itself."[48]

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[45] De Byurn, 92, footnotes 22, 23. While the Latin we have available of Pelagius's commentary on Romans is identical to the traditional translation of the phrase, Pelagius had more of an Eastern understanding.

[46] John Chrysostom, "Homily X." *Homilies on Romans*. Available at http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/NPNF1-11/npnf1-11-74.htm#P2378_2304524; Internet: accessed 6/7/02. Verse 15.

[47] Ibid, ver. 19.

[48] Meyendorff,146.

Here Theodoret comes remarkably close to the view of Pelagius on the issue of infant baptism. The acknowledgement that infants "have not yet tasted of sin" was a Pelagian view Pelagius himself seems to have held. Meyendorff surmises that "there is indeed a consensus in Greek patristic and Byzantine traditions in identifying the inheritance of the Fall as an inheritance of essentially morality rather than sinfulness, sinfulness being merely a consequence of mortality."[49]

Viewing Augustine and Pelagius in light of Eastern Christian teaching sheds a clarifying light on the issue of "original sin" in the Pelagian controversy. It is likely, given our discussion, that Pelagius was reflecting or processing the Eastern Christian teaching on the nature of Adam's sin and its effects on humanity. [50] Thus it would seem, at least on this issue, that Pelagius ought to be absolved of the charge of heresy. Also given the ecumenical gravity of this issue between East and West it would seem that this controversy needs to be seriously reconsidered.[51] Retracing the Pelagian controversy through the lens of the rapidly forming doctrine of original sin allows us to see how hastily and how narrowly decisions were made concerning Pelagius and his teaching.

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[49] Ibid, 145.

[50] Peter Brown, "The Patrons of Pelagius: The Roman Aristocracy Between East and West," The Journal of Theological Studies 21:1 (April 1970) 72.

[51] Ferguson, 83. Ferguson observes that even at this early date the stage was set for a split between East and West over this issue.

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