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A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

PELAGIUS: THE MAKING OF A HERETIC

by JAMES BRECKENRIDGE

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DURING the twilight years of the Roman Empire many of the pagan literati found consolation in the midst of political and moral chaos by turning to Stoicism, that philosophical tradition which traced its origin back to Zeno (c. 336-264 B.C.). It was not a mere coincidence that Stoic doctrines gained wide acceptance in times of distress. For the perplexed, Stoicism offered a guideline to help one overcome the uncertainties of life and find a way in the world. One of the most attractive features of this philosophy was its teaching concerning freedom. The Stoics held that the entire universe is pervaded by a divine principle or Logos which is especially evident in the rational nature of man. Since the course of history is determined by Providence, man can do nothing to alter his world. However, Stoicism found a refuge in the human psyche. By recognizing the kinship that exists between the soul and the Logos which governs the universe, the wise man knows that all things which come to pass are for the best. Acting upon this knowledge the sage willingly accepts his lot in life as coming from the hand of God. The one true freedom, then, that man possesses is the freedom to change his interior attitude from one of rebellion to one of assent. Speaking in typical Stoic fashion, Marcus Aurelius (emperor A.D. 161-180), declared his surrender to Providence when he said, "All that is in tune with thee, O Universe, is in tune with me!"¹

Without freedom of the will in a world where everything else is predetermined, the Stoics argued, virtue would be impossible. To live a virtuous life one must voluntarily submit to the divine will. No one can compel a person to be virtuous. Man possesses complete moral autonomy, and he alone can decide whether he will live in harmony with the divine nature that is manifested in

¹ *Meditations*, iv, 23, trans. C. R. Haines (Loeb Classical Library, London and New York, 1916).

his own rational soul or whether he will rebel against it. Thus Epictetus (c. A.D. 50-138), the Stoic teacher, declared, "This is the law which God has ordained, and He says, 'If you wish any good thing, get it from yourself' ".² The true Stoic was the self-sufficient master of his fate. No circumstances could harm him, for they are the circumstances he would have freely chosen. Whatever befell his body, his soul remained unscathed. Only the individual could corrupt himself by the abuse of freedom.

It is not surprising that many of the motifs found in Stoicism reappear in the early Christian Fathers. Stoics and Christians alike agreed in their affirmation that the world is governed by Providence in opposition to the doctrine that the world came into being by chance. Of course there were crucial differences between Stoicism and the gospel. The pantheism and rigid determinism of the former never found a place within the mainstream of Christian thought. However, the doctrine of the freedom of the will with its call to decision and moral responsibility gained a sympathetic hearing among a number of the Fathers. We find more than a trace of this Stoic motif in the teaching of Justin Martyr (c. A.D. 100-165) that every created being is capable of vice and virtue, for without such a capacity no one could be praised for his deeds.³ Irenaeus (c. A.D. 130-200) strikes a similar chord when he says that all men have the same ability to do what is good or not to do it".⁴ In spite of the sharp line he drew between faith and philosophy, Tertullian (c. A.D. 160-220) reflects the Stoic concept that volitional autonomy constitutes the specially divine part of man by equating the "image of God" with freedom of the will.⁵

Seen against this background, it is clear that the heresy associated with Pelagius (*fl.* early fifth century) did not come into being *ex nihilo*. The monk who earned the wrath of Augustine of Hippo by his teachings on grace and free will could find numerous passages from the early Fathers to support his position. Why, then, was Pelagius eventually condemned as a heretic? This is not a simple question to answer. Perhaps Justin Martyr and a number of other Christian writers would not be included among the Fathers today if they had encountered Augustine on the subject of grace and freedom. But it was more than the authority of Augustine that led to the downfall of Pelagius. The

² *Discourse*, i, 29, trans. W. A. Oldfather (Loeb Classical Library, 1926).

³ *Apology*, ii, 7.

⁴ *Against Heresies*, iv, 37.

⁵ *Against Marcion*, ii, 5.

early Patristic writers who emphasized the autonomy of the human will set the stage for a radical interpretation of divine grace without engaging in such an interpretation themselves. It remained for Pelagius to develop a doctrine of grace that was commensurate with a view of human nature that had been nurtured under the influence of Stoicism.

Stoicism was not the only influence that moulded the thought of Pelagius, though the role it played in his doctrine of freedom and grace cannot be minimized. Pelagius was indebted to a collection of ethical aphorisms that was incorrectly ascribed by many in his day to Pope Sixtus (Xystus) II (martyred 258). In spite of the popularity this work enjoyed in Christian circles, there can be no doubt that much of its thought is pagan in origin. In man, according to the aphorisms, there is "something similar to God" (*habes in te aliquid simile dei*).⁶ Elsewhere in the collection it is stated that the soul of a devout man is "God among men".⁷ Such statements reflect the idea, so popular in Hellenistic philosophy, that man is endowed with divinity by virtue of his rational nature. To be sure, such a concept was not confined to the Stoics. There is a certain affinity between these aphorisms and the assertion of Iamblichus (died c. A.D. 330), the Neoplatonist, that "our intellect is a god".⁸

In order to see Pelagius in his proper perspective, we must understand that he was the recipient of a tradition that was much broader than Stoicism. Hellenistic philosophers from various schools popularized the optimistic belief that human nature can normally be improved through education and is capable of good. The idea that the human will is enslaved by sin would have been as repugnant to the Epicureans and Neoplatonists as it would have to the Stoics. However, it is the Stoic influence that is most evident in Pelagius' teaching on freedom. Like the disciples of Zeno, he rejected the idea that the will needs anything extrinsic to itself in order to be enabled to obey the divine law. This conviction led him to define grace as the God-given ability of all men to avoid sin.⁹ That all men should be endowed with a capacity to shun evil was a gratuitous act on the part of the Creator; therefore, this capacity could be called "grace". God, he acknowledged, has so created man that he can choose between good and evil, but the actual willing and doing of good is to be

⁶ *The Sentences of Sextus*, ed. H. Chadwick (Cambridge, 1959), No. 35.

⁷ *Ibid.*, No. 7a.

⁸ *Protrepticus*, VIII 138K, ed. H. Pistelli (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1888).

⁹ Augustine, *De gestis Pelagii*, 22.

ascribed solely to human effort.¹⁰ If there were further need of grace to assist man in the attainment of moral excellence this would be tantamount to a denial of free will.

Pelagius and his disciples also included moral instruction and legislation under the heading of "grace". Man's sluggishness in exercising his capacity for good, they argued, is due in large part to his ignorance of God's will. One simply needs to know the good in order to perform it. The divine laws, therefore, can be regarded as the grace of God which helps man not to sin.¹¹ But the divine precepts do not coerce the human will. They are the external means whereby man is prompted to return to the law of his own nature which is always in harmony with the will of God.

In spite of the bitter controversy that raged between Augustine and Pelagius, there is at least one apparent similarity between the protagonists. In his teaching on grace Augustine affirmed that prior to the Fall God endowed Adam with sufficient grace to enable him to persevere in virtue.¹² This sounds very much like the Pelagian equation of grace with man's God-given ability to avoid sin. But here the apparent similarity comes to an end. As a result of the Fall, Augustine argues, Adam and his posterity lost the ability to avoid sin by the exercise of the will. In his present condition man cannot even desire to do that which is good unless God initiates such a desire in the human will by His prevenient grace.¹³

The chasm separating Pelagius and Augustine cannot be minimized. Following a Stoic motif, Pelagius made freedom to do the good an essential attribute of humanity. Augustine, on the other hand, regarded such freedom as a supernatural gift which does not constitute an integral part of the structure of humanity. The implications of these divergent positions are extremely significant. The Pelagian-Stoic image of man makes a gnostic type of redemption possible. That is to say, salvation is potentially available for all through a knowledge of the divine law. This law is found in written form in the Scriptures, but it is also readily accessible to all men within their own rational nature. Salvation, then, entails a return to the natural, i.e. the rational.

According to Augustine's image of man, knowledge of one's

¹⁰ Aug., *De gratia Christi et peccato originali*, i, 4.

¹¹ Aug., *De gratia et libero arbitrio*, 23.

¹² Aug., *De correptione et gratia*, 31.

¹³ *De natura et gratia*, 35.

duty is not adequate. Nothing less than regeneration will do. Man may know what is good, but mere knowledge does not carry ability with it. Recalling the dilemma expressed by Paul in the seventh chapter of Romans, Augustine observes that we frequently will what we fail to do, and we often do that which is contrary to the will.¹⁴ Man is divided against himself. There is a great hiatus between knowing and doing, and only supernatural grace can overcome this breach in the human psyche.

A superficial investigation of the teachings of Pelagius may lead one to wonder why this monk, so renowned for his piety, was ever accused of heresy. It cannot be denied that he regarded human freedom as a gift from God. Man, he held, can avoid sin only because he has been endowed with that ability by the Creator. Up to a point, even Augustine could not disagree with that. The problem arose from the fact that Pelagius did not acknowledge any real distinction between this "grace" that had been bestowed upon man and the rest of the human faculties such as seeing, reasoning, hearing, etc. All were a part of man's "natural" constitution. This, of course, was in keeping with the Stoic view of man which we have considered briefly. Such an accommodation with pagan philosophy was a high price to pay. Pelagius taught that sinners must turn to Christ to receive forgiveness, but this admonition lacks a sense of urgency if men possess complete freedom within themselves to lead a sinless life. If all men, regardless of their awareness of Christ, possess an innate ability to obey the will of God, then "grace" becomes synonymous with human nature. There is not a great distance separating such a position from a fully developed doctrine of religious humanism in which man is able to attain his highest destiny apart from any recourse to the supernatural.

While one may not agree with every point of Augustine's refutation of Pelagius, it would be difficult to deny that the Christian missionary enterprise finds a much firmer *raison d'être* in the African doctor's appraisal of human nature than it does in the anthropology tendered by Pelagius. The good news of the Christian faith includes the declaration that freedom is a gift that must come to man by a special act of God through Jesus Christ. The heresy of Pelagius lay in his inability to grasp the importance of this aspect of the gospel.

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¹⁴ *De spiritu et littera*, 53.