MODERN REFORMATION

*Theology*

# Grace, Sin, and Will

## The Structure of the Debate

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The debate is as old as Christianity itself: what is the relationship between the fallen state of humanity in sin and the work of divine grace, or between God's initiative and human willing in salvation? Identifying the historical theological structure of this complicated debate will bring clarity and precision to our own reflections on the Bible and our discussions about its faithful interpretation. With this purpose in mind, this article will "unpack" the chart "Grace, Sin, and Will" found on page 16. We begin with an introduction to the basic framework of the debate as it developed in the early church over a disagreement about monergism.

Monergism means there is only one actor or one cause that initiates and effects the turning of a sinner toward God in conversion. The identity of this agent is the central point of contrast between the theological positions of Augustinianism and Pelagianism.

### A Tale of Two Monergisms: *Augustinianism*

Augustinianism names the actor as God himself, who works effectively by giving "divine grace," understood as an inner gift bestowed through Christ and by the Holy Spirit. This grace flows from the fountain of our heavenly Father's benevolent disposition toward us in the action of the Holy Spirit to confer on us the manifold benefits of Christ's life and work for us. These are the gifts of grace and include the forgiveness of sins, the imputation of the righteousness of Christ, knowledge of God, communion with God, conversion, and conformity to God.

The Augustinian position argues that all humanity is guilty and corrupted by the fall of Adam, and that this condition renders humanity absolutely *incapable* of loving God and performing good works. Fallen humans are at enmity with God in that by nature we are only able to choose sin, and yet we are responsible for our sin because we desire it and will it freely without coercion. This is a strong doctrine of total depravity that includes original sin and human inability to find God. Thankfully, by God's efficacious sovereign grace through *operating grace* (or efficacious grace), the sinful human heart, mind, and will are *regenerated* and made alive, which manifests itself in conversion. Augustinianism argues this position over against another form of monergism originating in the late fourth century typically referred to as "Pelagianism."

### *Pelagianism*

In the Pelagian view, the *human will* is the sole efficient cause in initiating and effecting conversion. Pelagianism stresses human *ability* in taking the initial and continuing steps toward conversion to God through moral self-effort, apart from the operation of divine grace. Seeing grace purely as an external aid provided by God, Pelagianism sharply opposes the Augustinian insistence that it is God who must make us alive by grace.

In Pelagianism, humans are responsible moral agents because they are born with a kind of moral neutrality that makes it possible for them not only to will freely, but also to *desire* correctly and thus will and decide for the good, including even the choice not to sin and turn to God. We have a guide, Pelagius argued, in that God's revelation of natural law can be known by reason and it instructs us in what we not only *should* but in fact *can* do. Even though this revelation has been obscured by sin, God gives what Pelagius called "grace" in the form of further revelation of the Law of Moses and the life and teachings and example of Christ. Thus divine "grace" provides a sufficient positive example that all people can accept and imitate by their own will and for their own salvation. For Pelagianism, then, this kind of legal instruction (or "grace") will always suffice for conversion in that it gives humans an adequate understanding of what we should, ought, and can do. But this "grace" may be taken or ignored—it isn't necessarily effective in reality, because humans are the ultimate decision-makers.

Clearly denying both guilt and the internal corruption of sin and consequent human inability, Pelagianism was condemned as heresy by the early church in 418 at the Council of Carthage and in 431 at the Council of Ephesus.

From that point on in church history, the Augustinian-Pelagian debate about original sin and human inability became the crucial theological context for understanding sin, the human will, and the nature and work of grace. A debate unfolded

throughout Christian history, and the churches of the Protestant Reformation were fully committed to the Augustinian view, along with the late medieval Augustinian tradition from which the Reformation emerged. Pelagianism came and went with its many nuances, and much later it became the basic position of early modern Socinianism and Deism (i.e., Unitarianism) that turned Christianity into a rationalist moral philosophy, American revivalism during the Second Great Awakening (i.e., Charles Finney), and especially Protestant liberalism that denies original sin and human inability in matters of salvation. As the chart indicates, these two contrasting "monergisms" stand as far apart as God the sovereign Lord of salvation on the one hand and unaided human effort on the other. Lying in the middle-ground between these two poles is an endless array of attempted mediating positions.

## Sailing Too Close to the Rocks

Is a mediating position possible? Between the two forms of monergism there have been many attempts to formulate a view that affirms in various ways some account of the necessity of an internal work of divine grace described by Augustinianism *as well as* the human moral ability and responsibility as argued in Pelagianism. These mediating positions are collectively referred to as "synergism," or "a working together" of efficient causes in initiating and bringing about conversion. In this context, the synergism of causes typically refers to divine grace and the human will. It is important to bear in mind that "synergistic" theologies are situated all along a spectrum and come in various forms and versions. We introduce here two broad categories of synergism.

On the one side is "semi-Pelagianism," which is fairly close to the full Pelagian position. This view holds that the human will is able to act as the sole efficient cause to bring about conversion; in other words, it agrees with the Pelagian optimism in human ability to act as if unfettered by sin. But then at the same time, semi-Pelagianism is also somewhat conscious of human sinfulness and so insists that divine grace must be given to effect salvation, and human wills simply cooperate with that grace. Thus semi-Pelagians deny the Pelagian view that grace is simply an external special aid. An early promoter of this hybrid position was the theologian and monk John Cassian (ca. 360-435). The tendency toward ambiguity inherent in synergisms of this sort is evident in many of Cassian's theological assertions. For example, in his book *The Conference* he argues: "When God notices good will making an appearance in us, at once he enlightens and encourages it and spurs it on to salvation, giving increase to what he himself planted and saw rise from our own efforts" (13.8.4). Here Cassian clearly sought a mediating position that affirmed a Pelagian account of human ability and responsibility, with some measure included of an account of our intrinsic need for divine grace to spur on our human effort. He illustrated this cooperation further with his famous simile of the farmer: "Crops will not grow unless the farmer toils; but equally, they will not grow unless there is sufficient sunshine and rain" (*Confessions* 13.3). Thus we must perform our responsibilities and God will perform his. Later medieval theologians would say, "To those who do what lies within them, God does not deny grace." But again, this leaves us with a kind of ambiguity of action: the farmer must initially plant the seed that God provides, and then the sun and rain (i.e., divine grace) will bring forth crops in cooperation with the actions of the human will. So who exactly is responsible for salvation, God for his glory and our good, or humans who would seem then to have a reason to boast?

Because Cassian affirmed some need for divine grace to work in us, he wasn't fully Pelagian, but he certainly wasn't Augustinian either. He tended to focus on human ability, responsibility, and the spiritual disciplines rather than original sin and human inability. Yet he was a critically important figure in church history as his views on the responsibilities and disciplines of the Christian life became the theological foundation for much of European monasticism, such as *The Rule of St. Benedict* (480-547), which proved to be one of the most influential writings of Western spirituality.

In the final analysis of semi-Pelagianism, the Synod of Orange in 529 condemned various forms of synergism as heresy. Further, because Cassian's synergism was suspiciously like full-Pelagianism, he was never canonized as a saint in the Western church.

Cassian's was not, however, the only option for a mediating position. Other synergistic theologies, by way of contrast, held that sin is somewhat more corrupting and harmful than Cassian imagined, and that consequently a greater measure of divine grace is needed—even divine grace that initiates and begins the process of salvation. On some accounts, divine grace may even be stated as the sole efficient cause that initiates regeneration and conversion. This view, argued in different ways by Erasmus and Philipp Melanchthon at the time of the Reformation, holds that sin is internally corrupting *and* that divine grace is both fundamental and crucial. In much the same way, evangelical Arminians argue that they affirm the Augustinian doctrine of original sin and human inability *to some degree*. However, these synergisms also attempt to affirm human responsibility by arguing that subsequent to this initiating act of divine grace alone, the human will and divine grace must continue in a *cooperation* that ultimately brings about salvation. So, where semi-Pelagian synergisms on one end of the spectrum virtually deny the doctrines of original sin and human inability by minimizing our need for an initiating work of regeneration by divine grace, evangelical Arminian synergisms at the other end of the spectrum affirm the necessity of the internal divine work of regeneration, even as they seek to include an account of human responsibility. It is to these forms of synergism that the early Reformers and their successors responded.

## The Debate Revisited

What about an orthodox mediating position that is faithful to the teaching of Scripture? We have seen how an early attempt at *synergism* foundered on the sharp rocks of Pelagianism. Throughout the Middle Ages, additional proposals were presented to the church, each in its own way seeking to affirm the Augustinian doctrine of original sin and human inability *to some extent* while also affirming human responsibility in cooperation with an internally conferred divine grace. Central to the disagreement of the Protestant Reformation was the faithful interpretation of Scripture as articulated in

Augustinianism. On the one side, the debate was represented by a synergistic interpretation of Augustinianism by the humanist scholar Desiderius Erasmus, who was a priest ordained in the Augustinian order and who wrote a famous book in 1524 titled *Concerning the Freedom of the Will*. On the other side, the monergistic interpretation of Augustinianism was set out in a sharp reply from another Augustinian monk named Martin Luther in *On the Bondage of the Will* (1525).

Erasmus attempted to claim Augustine for what he saw as a moderate position. Here divine grace works inwardly to regenerate, strengthen, and free the human will in a lifelong process of our conversion from sin to God. This is called *cooperative grace*—although any movement of the human soul toward God is possible only because of God's grace (*including* the initial movements); the ultimate efficacy of this grace depends on the responsiveness of the independent human will as to whether it actually leads to salvation or not. For Erasmus, cooperative grace in God's work of regeneration and conversion is a *sufficient* cause (the cause needed to produce the effect of another cause) that can become an *efficient* cause (the cause that actually produces the effect) if and when our wills cooperate with it. The key point is that the efficacy of this divine grace does not come from our wills but *from the grace itself*. It is only divine grace that regenerates and converts us, but this grace cannot complete this work in us without the cooperation of our wills in seeking it through the church (by means of the sacramental system). This is a clear repudiation of Pelagian monergism and also of semi-Pelagian synergisms that deny the necessity of regeneration by making the human will, and not divine grace, the sole efficient cause in initiating conversion. Thus for Erasmus, even though our wills make a real contribution, our salvation is still "thanks to God." The concern here is with divine justice, human responsibility, and a humanistic piety *in synergism with* an affirmation of original sin and human inability to some extent.

Against this synergism of Erasmus, Luther forcefully restated the Augustinian position on original sin and human inability in terms of the bondage and liberation of the human will. This was an emphatic denial of any active role for the human will in the regeneration that initiates and effects conversion. Luther followed Augustine in claiming that the fallen human will is still able to make choices that are not coerced by an imposed necessity (it is still free); however, as a *fallen* will, it is in bondage to our own fallen capacities, making it able only to choose sin. In our fallen state, our free will "avails for nothing but to sin." Because the fallen human will is so profoundly oriented to the self, to be converted by a contribution of our wills would make it a self-willing and therefore self-defeating work. The only remedy for this terrible bondage is a divine grace that actually opposes the will in a way that does not eliminate it, but rather accomplishes for it what it cannot do for itself. This can be a work only of *operating grace* in the Augustinian sense, and regeneration and conversion—both initially and ultimately—must be *sola gratia* (by the efficacy of divine grace alone). Thus, for Luther, the good news is that we are not transformed and converted by any act of our wills, but by what God has said and done for us and to us personally in Jesus Christ as proclaimed to us in the gospel.

So the concern for Luther was to emphasize that it is the risen Lord who penetrates our heart, mind, and soul and changes us, raising us from spiritual death to life. Our fallen human will is not an agent in our effectual calling or regeneration; it is by God's grace and God's will alone. Here Erasmus strongly opposed Luther, arguing that without human cooperation there seems to be no reason for moral effort, and God seems to be unjust in condemning those who resist him. But for Luther the whole idea of cooperation is anathema, and all human moral effort must naturally come as a response to what God has *already* done for us—liberating our wills so that our love for him and our service for one another may be truly free. In short, Erasmus declared, "Let God be good!" and Luther responded, "Let God be God!" and these two contrasting positions continue to give the ongoing debate its theological structure to the present day.

## And the Debate Goes On

The sharp disagreement between Luther and Erasmus brought an ancient debate into the Reformation and gave it a new theological structure that would inform ongoing controversies, beginning with the debate among later Lutherans over Philipp Melanchthon's theology (after whom the "Philippists" were named) and among the Reformed over Jacob Arminius's theology (thus "Arminianism"). The latter was the most significant expansion of the debate between Augustinian monergism on the one hand and grace-minded synergism on the other.

Beginning with the Lutheran debate, we have the Philippists led by Luther's right-hand man Philipp Melanchthon (1497-1560). Although he remained committed to the work of the Reformation, Melanchthon sought a sort of Augustinian half-measure that might bring reconciliation with Rome. In other words, he argued for a synergism in the truest sense where the Word, the Spirit, and the human will are three concurrent *efficient* causes of regeneration and conversion. Here divine grace is bestowed by the Spirit in and through the Word in the instant we hear it. The human will is enlivened by this grace and enabled to cooperate with it or to resist it. Now, it must be said that on the whole, Lutherans rejected Melanchthon's proposal in the *Formula of Concord* (1577), and reaffirmed a clear monergistic Augustinianism where there are indeed two efficient causes in regeneration and conversion, namely, the Holy Spirit and the Word of God (but not the human will). They did make an interesting concession, however, in drawing a distinction between *prevenient grace* (the preparatory grace that precedes our response in conversion by enabling us to really hear the law and see that we are sinners) and *operating grace* (the efficacious grace that actually converts us through the promise of the gospel according to the work of the Spirit in regenerating the will, illuminating the mind, and imparting faith). In other words, Lutherans denied that conversion will always be achieved and instead argued that grace can be resisted and prevenient grace rejected. Operating grace has to be added to prevenient grace as a subsequent gift for true cooperation to take place. To this day, Lutherans believe that this view accurately reflects the teaching of Scripture and stands in contrast to the more radical Protestant and radical Pietist theologies that deny Augustinianism.

The debate also came to a head in the Reformed camp with the Calvinist-Arminian controversy. In the Netherlands, a mediating synergist position based on the teaching of Jacob Arminius (1560-1609) was proposed by his students in a

five-point Remonstrance, or list of grievances, presented for debate in 1610. These Arminian Remonstrants, as they were called, argued for a modified synergism that attempted to affirm human inability and sin, but also included a dynamic notion of *prevenient grace*. They defined prevenient grace as an initial operating grace internally communicated through the Word that enables the enlivened human will to respond positively to the gospel, and thus to cooperate with a continuing operation of grace for salvation. This view was rejected by Reformed theologians at the Synod of Dort (1618-19), and their response is summarized in five corresponding points commonly represented with the acronym "TULIP." In answer to the stated Arminian points of human inability and prevenient grace, the Calvinists stated the points of *total depravity* and *irresistible grace* (human nature is entirely fallen, and the human will is in total bondage to sin and at enmity with God unless and until there is an effective regeneration through divine operating grace *that makes us* willing to come to God by making God irresistibly desirable to us). These monergistic Calvinist doctrines were reaffirmed by the *Westminster Confession* (1648) and have remained central tenets of Reformed theology. Arminianism, however, soon generated a variety of new synergist views, some more or less committed to the Augustinian doctrines of original sin and human inability. These views range from the modified evangelical synergism of Jacob Arminius, other Remonstrants, and John Wesley on the one hand, to a clear denial of Augustinianism in the semi-*Pelagian* synergisms of radical Arminians on the other. Since the Reformation, many other popular expressions of "Arminianism" have arisen in contemporary evangelicalism that could be placed along the synergist spectrum.

With reference to the *"Grace, Sin, and Will"* chart, readers should take note of the complexity of the debate as well as its historical development from at least the fourth century. The task is now handed down to us to take up this conversation with clarity and precision in our own reflections on the teaching of Scripture, and in our own theological discussions and formulations.

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