

## Pelagianism

Pelagianism refers to ideas set forth by several theologians in the early 400s. These include Pelagius (birth and death dates unknown), Caelestius (birth and death dates unknown), and Julian of Eclanum (386-454).

Beginning in 412 Pelagius and Caelestius were involved in a bitter controversy with other theologians, notably **Augustine** and Jerome. The controversy concerned original **sin**, human **freedom**, and **grace**. One of the main teachings of the Pelagians was that no one inherits from Adam the guilt and corruption of sin. From this they concluded that baptizing infants is not required in order to free them from the guilt of Adam's sin and that humans can live without sin, since human nature has not been corrupted by Adam's sin. The Pelagians acknowledged that Adam's sin has an effect on us; however, they saw Adam's sin as affecting us by creating a powerful example of unfaithfulness. They interpreted Rom. 5:12 as affirming that each of us has sinned in imitation of Adam. According to Augustine, by contrast, this passage taught that everyone sinned *in Adam*. He argued that Adam's sin corrupted the totality of human nature, so that everyone born after Adam was conceived with a corrupted nature.

This difference led to a disagreement about freedom. For Augustine, the corruption of our nature resulted in a loss of freedom in relation to God. We are, he asserted, unable to know, love and obey God without a radical infusion of grace. Grace, for Augustine, heals our fallen nature and actually creates knowledge, love and obedience within us. Pelagius, on the contrary, argued that human nature had *not* been devastated by Adam's sin and that humans continue to have the ability to know, love and obey God. Of, course, Pelagians acknowledged that obeying God is not easy. Human will seems to be turned away from God. But they saw the problem, not as the will's inability to obey, but instead as the result of the accumulated effect of sins that we have committed. If we find ourselves unable to obey God, it is because our past sins have given us a disposition to sin. It is not (as Augustine taught) because our human nature was corrupted by Adam's sin.

There was also a dispute about grace. Augustine charged the Pelagians with underestimating our need of God's grace. For Augustine, because we can do nothing, God's grace must do everything. Those who do not obey God, he concluded, fail to obey because God has not extended grace to them. The Pelagians, however, took a different view. Pelagius thought of God's grace, not as a power that creates obedience within us, but as the means by which God illuminates us—teaching, revelation, and spiritual gifts—and which encourage us to obey God.

The controversy broke out in 412 when a council meeting in Carthage condemned Caelestius. By 415 Pelagius was also being criticized; however, the bishop of Jerusalem and later a synod meeting at Diospolis examined Pelagius and found his theology acceptable. The bishops of Carthage pursued the matter and were finally successful in getting the bishop of Rome (Celestine) and then the council of Ephesus (431) to condemn the views of the Pelagians. It is notable that the Pelagians' enemies were located mainly in West (especially North Africa) and that their supporters were found mainly in the East.