

Historical Theology: Salvation in the Patristic Era (AD 100-500)

Week 6: 2/15/23

Why do we study church history/historical theology and not just the Bible?

Many of the theological debates regarding salvation in the Patristic Era focused on the person and work of Christ and have been discussed previously this semester.

As review, circle the names of the good guys: Arius, Athanasius, Augustine, Cyril of Alexandria, Irenaeus, Marcion, Nestorius and Pelagius.

Do you agree/disagree with the following quote and why? “At the same time – may God forgive us! – we ascribe to the righteous One unrighteousness, and cruelty to the Holy One; first, by complaining that God has commanded the impossible, second, by imagining that some will be condemned by God for what they could not help; so that – the blasphemy of it! – God is thought of as seeking our punishment rather than our salvation... No one knows the extent of our strength better than God who gave us strength. ... God has not willed to command anything impossible, for God is righteous; and will not condemn anyone for what they could not help.”¹

Do you agree/disagree with this quote and why? “Everything good and everything evil, in respect of which we are either worthy of praise or of blame, is done by us, not born with us. We are not born in our full development, but with a capacity for good and evil; we are begotten as well without virtue as without vice, and before the activity of our own personal will there is nothing in man but what God has stored in him.”²

¹ For the source, see Footnote 3 on the next page. No cheating and looking ahead!

² See Footnote 4 on the next page for the source. Again, no looking ahead.

This is the reference for Footnote 1 from Page 1³ and this is the reference for Footnote 2 on Page 1.⁴

Salvation and Being “In Christ”

“Union with Christ is not one phrase or aspect of salvation; it is the whole of salvation in which all other aspects are subsets,” John and Paul employ the terms or variations 216 times, and “Paul’s repeated use of the term reveals that it is the central key to the apostle’s doctrine of salvation and perhaps even his whole theology. However, since “in him,” “in Christ,” “in the Lord,” and so forth, are so ubiquitous in his writings, we sometimes tend to gloss over them and miss their true importance. Besides, the expressions seem abstract and difficult to understand.”⁵

What is the difference between positional union with Christ and experiential union with Christ?

A faulty view of union with Christ based in the East: Theosis

The rise of “*theosis*” in the Eastern church: partially from Athanasius against Arius: “Christ became like us so that we would become like him.”

Theosis teaches that we become divine in Christ, sometimes by Christ alone or other times when combined with great effort by us.

Theosis finds support from 2 Peter 1:4.

Where do we find similarities today with theosis in other cults/religions?

³ Pelagius. Cited in Alister E. McGrath, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998), 81.

⁴ *Documents of the Christian Church* (4th Ed) ed. Henry Bettenson, Chris Maunder (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011), 56.

⁵ Kenneth Keathley, “The Work of God in Salvation” in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel Akin (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2007) 687.

Universalism in the Patristic Era

Origen and Gregory of Nyssa contributed positively on other issues, but were open to believing that everyone would be saved.

Union with Christ: Substitutionary Sacrifice

Tertullian emphasized the suffering of Christ *for* our sins (1 Cor. 15:4).

Augustine is a key figure: "For our sakes, the Lord paid this one death which he did not owe in order that the death we do owe might do us no harm."⁶

Augustine Vs. Pelagius

Pelagius was concerned about the doctrines of grace and moral laxity in Rome.

Pelagius viewed grace as: God grants the proper _____ for right action.

Pelagius viewed it as difficult, but possible for people to be _____.

Pelagius taught that Adam's sin impacts humanity by being a bad example that we often follow.

Augustine taught that all are born in sin because they are born in Adam (see Romans Chapter _____) and are culpable apart from rebirth in Christ.

Augustine viewed grace as: essential to be brought to life, not just as an aid to choosing what is good.

Augustine viewed all people as sinners (Psalm 143:2 and 1 John 1:8) and that salvation was found in Christ alone.

Augustine also viewed love (not faith alone) as the primary requirement for receiving redemption and held that grace flowed through the sacraments of the church.⁷

⁶ *On the Trinity* 4.13, 17, quoted in *Historical Theology for the Church*, 97.

⁷ Keathley, 698-699.

How does this relate to Christ: If mankind can be sinless, then the _____ is unnecessary.

When was the debate between Augustine and Pelagius settled:

From the 2nd Council of Orange (529):

“CANON 2. If anyone asserts that Adam's sin affected him alone and not his descendants also, or at least if he declares that it is only the death of the body which is the punishment for sin, and not also that sin, which is the death of the soul, passed through one man to the whole human race, he does injustice to God and contradicts the Apostle, who says, ‘Therefore as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned’ (Rom. 5:12)” and “CANON 3. If anyone says that the grace of God can be conferred as a result of human prayer, but that it is not grace itself which makes us pray to God, he contradicts the prophet Isaiah, or the Apostle who says the same thing, ‘I have been found by those who did not seek me; I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me’ (Rom 10:20, quoting Isa. 65:1)”.

Where do we see Pelagian views today?

Further Resources

Homework: <https://www.christianity.com/wiki/history/what-is-pelagianism-and-are-you-accidentally-committing-it.html>

To prepare for next week: <https://jgduesing.com/theology-in-the-medieval-era-zachary-m-bowden-on-the-church/>

For the semester:

Duesing, Jason and Nathan Finn. *Historical Theology For The Church*. Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2021.

Duesing, Jason. *Seven Summits in Church History*. Nashville, TN: Rainer Publishing, 2016.

Ferguson, Everett. *Church History, Volume One: From Christ to the Pre-Reformation*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013.

Litfin, Bryan. *Getting to Know The Church Fathers: An Evangelical Introduction*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016.

Akin, Daniel, editor. *A Theology for the Church*. Nashville, TN: B&H, 2007.