

# SEMI-PELAGIANISM AND GRACE

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Semi-Pelagianism was condemned as a heresy at the Council of Orange in 529 AD. The Council affirmed the necessity of the grace of God and was, in some senses, Augustine's triumph, albeit a century after his death. Semi-Pelagianism has, however, been called 'a doctrine of grace'; its condemnation at a Council that heralded grace seems, therefore, ironic. What, then, is this Semi-Pelagianism?<sup>1</sup>

The titles given in the conference programme for this and one other paper do not include the term 'original sin', the conference's theme. I was somewhat relieved by this when it came to research because I found that Semi-Pelagianism centres around a controversy specifically related to grace and free will, not original sin. I was even more relieved when I spoke to the conference organiser, for his question to me—'So, are we Semi-Pelagian or what?'—made it clear that the purpose of this particular paper was to articulate this '-ism' in order to clarify our position in the wider context with confidence. Apparently, the term has been thrown around as a 'swear-word' by those who would oppose the Wesleyan-Arminian tradition. I must admit, at the outset, that though I've heard a lot of swearwords, 'Semi-Pelagian' isn't one of them. Perhaps that is good, for it means no bias has been formed against it. Articulating the '-ism' has its place in the conference programme. Although Semi-Pelagianism is primarily pertinent to the grace/free-will debate, the topic of original sin is itself indispensable to discussion of grace and free will.

## THE SPECTRUM<sup>2</sup>

Before articulating what Semi-Pelagianism is, it may be helpful to outline briefly two contrasting views which are particularly relevant to the discussion: Augustinianism and Pelagianism.

Augustinianism argues that God's grace is required at every stage of the Christian life. Through Adam, sin and its punishments entered the world, affecting everyone through hereditary transmission. Post-Fall, the will is no longer free because it is enslaved to sin. Therefore, humans can only will and do evil; God's grace is needed to will and to do good. This grace both precedes and accompanies

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<sup>1</sup> J Pohle, 'Semipelagianism,' *The Catholic Encyclopedia, Volume XIII* (Robert Appleton Company, 1912) (Online Edition Copyright, 1999), <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13703a.htm>> (15 Feb 2000) (hereafter *Catholic Encyclopedia*), 1.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Henry Chadwick, *Augustine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 107-119; A A Hodge, 'A Comparison of Systems,' *Outlines of Theology*, 1860, <[wysiwyg://44/http://www.geocities.com/Heartland/9170/AHODGE1.HTM](http://www.geocities.com/Heartland/9170/AHODGE1.HTM)> (1Mar 2000) (hereafter *Outlines*), 3-4; Alister E McGrath, *Christian Theology—An Introduction*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997<sup>2</sup>), 21-23, 423ff.

the faith and the goodness of humans. Furthermore, it is completely unmerited and it is irresistible.

Pelagianism has a much more positive outlook.<sup>3</sup> All did *not* sin in Adam. Adam alone was affected and was responsible for his sin. Each person is born in the same condition as Adam before he sinned. Pelagius did not share Augustine's notion of hereditary sinfulness. Rather, everyone is born with a free will, and there is nothing preventing each person from willing and doing good or evil.<sup>4</sup> Although God's grace is not needed for the former, it can be of aid. This 'influencing grace' is merited by the faithful but it is resistible.

## **TO WHAT DOES SEMI-PELAGIANISM REFER AND WHO WERE THE SEMI-PELAGIANS?**

### **Semi-Pelagianism**

If, by its name, it is assumed that 'Semi-Pelagianism' is closer to Pelagianism than Augustinianism, the designation is inappropriate—Semi-Pelagians affirmed the condemnation of Pelagianism by the Synod of Carthage in 418. Semi-Pelagianism has been described as a middle position between the Augustinianism and Pelagianism.<sup>5</sup> Even this is misleading. Owen Chadwick unreservedly states that its very name is wrong: 'The leaders of the school were not half-way to being disciples of Pelagius. They came nowhere near believing that a man might climb to heaven by deserving the help of God. Augustine stood far nearer to them than Pelagius. They were influenced by Augustine.'<sup>6</sup>

### **The Semi-Pelagians**

In any case, the main players would not have been familiar with the designation, as it was not applied to them until centuries later.<sup>7</sup> The early advocates of Semi-

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<sup>3</sup> Pelagius was influenced by the Eastern tradition.

<sup>4</sup> Lest this imply that Pelagius did not think humanity was sinful, it should be noted that, as Henry Chadwick states, both Augustine and Pelagius '[...] saw humanity as locked into a corporately sinful social tradition.' The issue that separates the two is heredity. For Pelagius, sinfulness was not hereditary; that sin was, in fact, universal, was simply a result of everyone following Adam's bad example by their own free will. Nevertheless, humans could escape this social tradition because they had within them the power to save themselves—a salvation by merit, as opposed to the salvation by grace advocated by Augustine (see Henry Chadwick, *Augustine*, 109).

<sup>5</sup> Hodge, *Outlines*, 4.

<sup>6</sup> Owen Chadwick, *John Cassian*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968<sup>2</sup>) (hereafter *Cassian*), 127.

<sup>7</sup> Sources are in agreement that the term, 'Semi-Pelagianism', was associated with the theology of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Jesuit, Luis Molina. There is some discrepancy as to when the word was first used. Some say it first appeared in the Lutheran Formula of Concord of 1577 (see R Kyle, 'Semi-Pelagianism: Advanced Information' <<http://www.mb-soft.com/believe/txc/semipela.htm>> [13 Mar 2000]); others say it was first coined between 1590 and 1600 (see *Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1). I will use this term to refer to them throughout the paper.

Pelagianism were known as Massilians. This paper focuses on two of its leading figures, St Vincent of Lérins and John Cassian, but the party included the leading bishops, priests and monks of Southern Gaul—those who lived in Marseilles and the neighbouring island of Lerinum (Lérins) during the 5<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>8</sup>

## THE CENTRAL TENET OF SEMI-PELAGIANISM

Semi-Pelagianism distinguishes between *initium fidei* (the beginning of faith) and *augmentum fidei* (the increase of faith), often ascribing the former to the power of the free will and the latter (including faith itself) to the grace of God. Bishop Faustus of Riez, a leading figure after Cassian and Vincent, compared the will to a ‘small hook’ which seizes grace.<sup>9</sup>

The Semi-Pelagians’ belief in the will’s ability to make the first move was paradoxically motivated by their conviction of the seriousness of sin and the fear that a doctrine of predestination would produce complacency in ethical behaviour. Such a view was supported by the belief that although original sin had severely weakened the will, one was still able to move towards God, that is, the grace necessary for salvation.

This was not an abstract theory, but what they saw to be indicative of their experience. It is summed up as: ‘Grace springs from the desire for it’.<sup>10</sup>

## A BRIEF HISTORY<sup>11</sup>

The years of controversy were from about 427 to 434 AD, but the seeds were planted much earlier. In 418, Pelagianism was condemned at the General Council of Carthage. Two years later, Augustine wrote to Vitalis of Carthage, who was heralding a view that would later be deemed Semi-Pelagian: the beginning of faith springs from the free will of nature. Augustine instructed Vitalis as to the necessity of grace preceding faith, and Vitalis acquiesced. Four years later (424), some monks in the African monastery of Hadrumetum reacted to an epistle of Augustine’s they received from a fellow monk who was a friend of Augustine’s. They protested: was free will of no account? Would they not be judged at all according to their works? Was their monastic discipline in vain? To their queries Augustine responded with two of his writings on grace, *De gratia et libero*

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<sup>8</sup> *Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1-6; Owen Chadwick, *Cassian*, 127, 135.

<sup>9</sup> *Catholic Encyclopedia*, 6.

<sup>10</sup> Owen Chadwick, *Cassian*, 114. This is the dictate of the *eastern* monks, yet it must be remembered that Cassian came to Gaul from the East and brought such influence with him.

<sup>11</sup> I am dependent on the following sources for this section: Owen Chadwick, *Cassian*, 127ff, 148ff; *Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1-8.

*arbitrio* and *De correptione et gratia*.<sup>12</sup> His reply seemed to appease these monks.

There were, however, some monks in Southern Gaul who were not so appeased. Around 427, they read the same works by Augustine but thought that he had gone too far in his estimation of grace, or rather not far enough in his estimation of free will. They disagreed with Augustine's doctrine of predestination, specifically arguing against an interpretation of Scripture which took from the fallen a desire for recovery. As they saw it, this doctrine made the moral struggle, which was so key to their disciplined life, valueless. They feared that adherence to the doctrine would lead to *tepor*—half-heartedness. Here, then, we get a glimpse of their view of the human condition—the fallen are in need of redemption but are not so depraved that they lack even the desire for it.

Prosper, who at this point became an important player on Augustine's side, was alarmed because he saw in the monks' rejection of Augustine's doctrine of predestination a leaning toward Pelagianism—a belief in their ability to attain grace on their own, the will acting before grace is given. He wanted Augustine to expose the Massilians.

About 428 or 429 Augustine replied to Prosper and Hilarius (another supporter) with two works<sup>13</sup> that clearly refuted the Massilians' errors, but treated them gently—as brothers or erring friends rather than heretics. The monks did not acquiesce, and after Augustine's death in 430, Prosper resumed the fight which was a battle of 'pamphlet and counter-pamphlet'.<sup>14</sup> Prosper and Hilarius went to Rome in 431 to get a verdict against the Semi-Pelagians; Pope Celestine's reply, however, was rather ambiguous. In about 432 or 433, Prosper turned his attack to Cassian.<sup>15</sup> This ended with an appeal to the new Pope, Sixtus III, of which no reply is recorded. Prosper's part in the controversy came to an end here and he left Gaul. The monks felt vindicated. Around 434, Vincent of Lérins wrote a treatise against heresies.<sup>16</sup> Ironically, he subtly implicated Augustine as a heretic; it was Vincent and his lot who were deemed the heretics some 100 years later.

Cassian died in 433, at which time Faustus took a leading role, keeping Cassian's views alive.<sup>17</sup> Monks who remained Augustinian in persuasion still read

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<sup>12</sup> The former maintained that grace did not impair the freedom of the will nor the merit of good works; however, grace causes the merit. The latter explained that correction is a means by which God works; grace allows the will to be free for without grace the will is enslaved to sin.

<sup>13</sup> *De praedestinatione sanctorum* and *De dono perseverantiae*.

<sup>14</sup> Owen Chadwick, *Cassian*, 130. Among the tracts were Prosper's *Letter to Rufinus* and Vincent of Lérins's *Objectiones Vincentianae*.

<sup>15</sup> This attack, in Prosper's *Contra Collatorem*, was directed at Cassian's *Conferences*, specifically the 13<sup>th</sup>.

<sup>16</sup> *Commonitorium pro catholicae fidei veritate* was Vincent's work against heresies which praised the antiquity and universality of the Catholic faith.

<sup>17</sup> Faustus became abbot of Lérins and then bishop of Riez in about 452.

Cassian's works, but with caution. In 529, Bishop Caesarius of Arles, leader of the Augustinian party in Lérins, submitted propositions to a meeting of bishops at Orange concerning the Semi-Pelagian view of the initial movement of the will, and it was there that Semi-Pelagianism was condemned.<sup>18</sup>

## AN ANALYSIS OF SEMI-PELAGIAN THOUGHT THROUGH THE WORKS OF VINCENT OF LÉRINS AND JOHN CASSIAN

### VINCENT OF LÉRINS

There is less to be gleaned on the subject of original sin from the work of Vincent than Cassian. The extant material reveals that Vincent was certainly the more antagonistic of the two. In challenging Augustine, Vincent appealed to logic and authority.

#### Objectiones Vincentianae

Vincent is the accepted author of *Objectiones Vincentianae*, one of the Semi-Pelagian tracts issued after Augustine's death. In his objections, Vincent articulated what he saw to be the logical conclusions to Augustine's views on predestination.

The following deductions are relevant to this discussion:

- 'Those faithful and holy men who fall, seem to do it by their own fault; but in reality God has secretly removed their will to good'; and
- 'Repentance is useless for one predestined to death.'<sup>19</sup>

Whether one can ascertain from this Vincent's view of the human condition is debatable. This tract is a harsh caricature of Augustine's thought in which little more than Vincent's bitter and less than eirenic attitude is evident (see especially footnote 19). Nevertheless, one must remember the context of his passion – the

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<sup>18</sup> Cassian himself was condemned in another way. Around the middle of the sixth century, an anonymous figure compiled a list of approved and disapproved books – Cassian appearing on the latter. The evidence, however, shows that the list was not referred to until the eighth century when it was represented as the authoritative edict of a pope at a Roman synod (albeit various popes until it came to be accepted as a decree of a synod under Pope Gelasius [492-496]) (see Owen Chadwick, *Cassian*, pp. 150-152). Though Cassian's reputation suffered, he had already been established, so to speak, making the disapproval ineffective. In the past, even those who disagreed with his doctrine of grace used and profited from his works. His *Institutes* were used as a rule for monks before the Rule of St Benedict, and Benedict certainly used Cassian. As Owen Chadwick states: 'A recognition of Benedict's stature should not obscure a recognition of the stature of the thought on which he depended' (155).

<sup>19</sup> From *Objectiones Vincentianae*, quoted in Owen Chadwick, *Cassian*, 118. Others included: 'God has created the greater part of the human race for eternal damnation'; 'God is the author of our sins'; 'Adulteries, incests and murders happen because God decreed them'; 'The majority of Christians cannot obtain perseverance even if they pray for it, because the predestination of God is immutable'; and 'When most Christians pray, "Thy will be done", they are praying for their own destruction, since this is the will of God' (118).

fear (motivating all Semi-Pelagian thought) that a doctrine of predestination would lead to complacency in ethical behaviour. As they stand, the objections imply that Vincent believed:

- The failure of the holy and the faithful is not the fault of God; God has not removed their will to good; and,
- Repentance is useful.

The implication is that original sin has not affected the will so as to make it incapable of desiring good. Yet this alone doesn't really say much—how capable is it? Very capable? Barely capable? This source alone doesn't answer the question. For Vincent, repentance is, no doubt, ascribed to the power of the will. That it refers here to the initial or very first movement of the will, however, is debatable since the context of these objections is the journey of the faithful. That is not to say, however, that for Vincent there is a qualitative difference between this repentance and initial repentance.

### **Commonitorium Pro Catholicae Fidei Veritate**

Vincent's appeal to authority, in support of his views, is evident in his work, *The Commonitory—For the Antiquity and Universality of the Catholic Faith Against the Profane Novelties of All Heresies*.<sup>20</sup> Again, gleaning an understanding of Vincent's view of the human condition is difficult. The work is neither a direct attack on Augustine nor an enunciation of Semi-Pelagian thought. Rather, it is the articulation of the guide or general rule he used to distinguish Catholic truth from heresy.<sup>21</sup> Vincent believed Augustine's doctrine of grace to be the latter and there are passages which indirectly implicate Augustine as a heretic and, in doing so, portray a Semi-Pelagian leaning.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> This was written under the name of Peregrinius, but ascribed to the hand of Vincent. See 'Introduction' in Vincent of Lérins, 'The Commonitory of Vincent of Lérins—For the Antiquity and Universality of the Catholic Faith Against the Profane Novelties of All Heresies,' trans C A Heurtley, in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series*, Volume XI, eds Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Oxford, 1894) (reprinted Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973) (hereafter 'Commonitory'), 123-159 (127).

<sup>21</sup> The rule is the authority of Holy Scripture. Where interpretations differ, appeal must be made to the interpretation supported by universality (i.e., the faith of the whole Church), antiquity (i.e., that which has been held from the earliest time) and consent (i.e., acknowledged by all or almost all whose office made their determinations authoritative)—'Quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus'. Novelty and development are distinct—progress in doctrine is possible as long as it is in terms of growth, thereby preserving the essence of the doctrine. See 'Introduction' in Vincent of Lérins, 'Commonitory', 127-130.

<sup>22</sup> The pleasure which Vincent took in the ambiguous decree issued by Pope Celestine in response to the plea of Prosper and Hilarius in 431 is reflected in 'The Commonitory'. He declared that the decree against novelty was in fact directed against Prosper and the rest of Augustine's disciples. (See Vincent of Lérins, 'The Commonitory', XXXIII.85, 156; see also Appendix III [on section 85], 159; cf Owen Chadwick, *Cassian*, 120, 132). Note: references for 'The Commonitory' include the chapter in Roman numerals followed by the section number. The page numbers refer specifically to the Eerdmans edition.

The work is passionate and heartfelt. That those deemed heretics are in sincere pursuit of truth is implicit in the fact that Vincent was condemned as one of the very heretics against whom his treatise is written—those he described as ‘pestilent and corrupt’,<sup>23</sup> whose ‘...wickedness...is doubly hateful...because they are not afraid to invite others to drink of the poison of heresy’,<sup>24</sup> and who ‘... do, in fact, what nurses do when they would prepare some bitter draught for children; they smear the edge of the cup all round with honey, that the unsuspecting child, having first tasted the sweet, may have no fear of the bitter.’<sup>25</sup>

If only chapter XXIV, section 62, was read, Vincent’s inclusion in the Semi-Pelagian party might be questioned: ‘For who ever before that profane Pelagius attributed so much antecedent strength to Free-will, as to deny the necessity of God’s grace to aid it towards good in every single act? Who ever before his monstrous disciple Coelestius denied that the whole human race is involved in the guilt of Adam’s sin?’<sup>26</sup>

However, I will endeavour to show that this strong affirmation of grace is the fundamental framework for all Semi-Pelagian thought. Nevertheless, lest he be seen as Augustinian, consider another excerpt:

[The heretics] dare to teach and promise, that in their church, that is, in the conventicle of their communion, there is a certain great and special and altogether personal grace of God, so that whosoever pertain to their number, without any labour, without any effort, without any industry, even though they neither ask, nor seek, nor knock, have such a dispensation from God, that, born up by angel hands, that is, preserved by the protection of angels, it is impossible they should ever dash their feet against a stone, that is, that they should ever be offended.<sup>27</sup>

Implicit in this attack against the doctrine of final perseverance is the concept of the initial movement of the will. Taken together the quotes provide a Semi-Pelagian picture of the human condition and the nature of the interplay between God and humanity. Against Pelagius, the will is affected (severely so, according to the first quotation, above); therefore, God’s grace is needed in the journey of the soul. Yet each person must ask, seek and knock. Original sin has weakened the will, but not to the extent that it is incapable of seeking the grace necessary for redemption. There seems to be an implicit distinction between willing and being/doing—original sin has rendered humanity incapable of being/doing good, but not incapable of desiring goodness.

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<sup>23</sup> Vincent of Lérins, ‘The Commonitory’, III.7, 132.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, VII.19, 136.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, XXV.65, 150.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, XXIV.62, 149-150.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, XXVI.69, 151.

## JOHN CASSIAN

### The Context: The Journey of the Soul

In the thirteenth of his twenty-four *Conferences*, John Cassian challenged Augustine's doctrine of grace. Yet it is unfair to use it as a starting point to understand him. Until this point, Cassian did not attempt to formulate a system of grace, that is, to define strictly the limits of moral responsibility and dependence on God's grace. His context was that of a monk and all along he had emphasised both humanity's absolute dependence upon God and the will's responsibility for choice between good and evil. These emphases appear incompatible, but, as Owen Chadwick wrote: 'Until he met the ideas of Augustine he perhaps hardly cared whether they looked incompatible or not. His reasons were reasons of the conscience.'<sup>28</sup> Cassian can not be rightly understood without understanding his context; neither can Semi-Pelagian thought in its entirety be rightly understood apart from Cassian's context since the Massilians were under the eastern influence he brought with him to Gaul.

For eastern monks, the journey of the soul depended on co-operation between God and the human will, a co-operation in which the human will acted first. The context of this journey was the ascetic life, a life characterised by effort, discipline, and struggle. Due to the Fall, the soul was cluttered with passions and vices. They lived according to their dictate: 'Cut away the passions, then grace will flow.'<sup>29</sup> The notion that everything was of God struck the monks as ridiculous, absolving humans of the responsibility the monks took so seriously. Yet their conviction regarding the need for grace was equally strong. If grace didn't already flow, there was no hope since the passions were so strong. And, lest one took pride in the struggle, there was the continual reminder of the soul's utter dependence on God's grace. That we may miss this fundamental framework is largely due to the fact that, for them, it was taken for granted. We look at their focus—human effort—and see only that.

### The Apparent Contradiction

That this was no system of grace, no attempt at a philosophical theory of the relationship between grace and free will, is evident in Cassian's thought, which often appears contradictory at worst, paradoxical at best. This is apparent in his discussion of pride, the vice which necessitates a continual reminder of the absolute dependence on God's grace—a discussion which also sheds light on his view of the human condition. In the twelfth book of his *Institutes*, Cassian stated:

[Pride] is the reason of the first fall, and the starting point of the original malady, which again insinuating itself into the first man, through him who

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<sup>28</sup> Owen Chadwick, *Cassian*, 116.

<sup>29</sup> Dictum of the eastern monks; cf. Owen Chadwick, 110.

had already been destroyed by it, produced the weaknesses and materials of all faults.<sup>30</sup>

Lest anyone boast regarding progress on the journey, Cassian—in chapters nine and ten of the same *Institute*—exhorted his fellow monks to realise their utter dependence on God’s grace:

We say these words of the Apostle: ‘Not I, but the grace of God with me,’ and ‘by the grace of God I am what I am;’ and ‘it is God that worketh in us both to will and to do of His good pleasure.’...For ‘every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights.’ ‘For what hast thou which thou didst not receive?’<sup>31</sup>

And in case there were any doubt, he continued, in chapter thirteen, with teaching from the elders, the Fathers, who passed down the way of perfection:

And so they say that no one can be altogether cleansed from carnal sins, unless he has realized that all his labours and efforts are insufficient for so great and perfect an end; and unless...he recognizes that it can only be gained by the mercy and assistance of God. For in order to acquire such splendid and lofty prizes of purity and perfection, however great may be the efforts of fastings and vigils and readings and solitude and retirement applied to it, they will not be sufficient to secure it by the merits of the actual efforts and toil. For a man’s own efforts and human exertions will never make up for the lack of the divine gift, unless it is granted by divine compassion in answer to his prayer.<sup>32</sup>

Certainly a far cry from Pelagianism! Is this not utter dependence on the grace of God? There are subtle clues to suggest it isn’t quite Augustinian, found in the phrases, ‘unless he has realized’, ‘unless he recognizes’ and ‘in answer to his prayer’. Cassian’s next words, found in chapter fourteen, develop these clues:

Nor do I say this to cast a slight on human efforts, or in the endeavour to discourage any one from his purpose of working and doing his best. But clearly and most earnestly do I lay down, not giving my own opinion, but that of the elders, that perfection cannot possibly be gained without these, but that by these only without the grace of God nobody can ever attain it. For when we say that human efforts cannot of themselves secure perfection

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<sup>30</sup> John Cassian, ‘The Works of John Cassian,’ trans. Edgar C. S. Gibson, in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series, Volume XI*, eds Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Oxford, 1894; reprinted Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973) (hereafter ‘Works’) 163-621 (Institutes, Book XII.5, 281). Note: references to Cassian’s Institutes include the book and chapter number, both in Roman numerals; references to his Conferences include Conference and chapter number, both in Roman numerals. In all cases, the page numbers refer specifically to the Eerdmans edition.

<sup>31</sup> Cassian, ‘Works’, Institutes, Book XII.ix-x, 282.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, Book XII.xiii, 283.

without the aid of God, we thus insist that God's mercy and grace are bestowed *only* upon those who labour and exert themselves, and are granted (to use the Apostle's expression) to them that 'will' and 'run'...to them that ask, and opened to them that knock, and found by them that seek; but that the asking, the seeking, and the knocking on our part are insufficient unless the mercy of God gives what we ask, and opens that at which we knock, and enables us to find that which we seek. For he is at hand to bestow all these things, if only the opportunity is given to him by our good will.<sup>33</sup>

## The Human Condition

This successive view is best understood in light of Cassian's understanding of the human condition. He focussed on the war between the flesh and spirit, that is, between sinful and spiritual desires. In reference to Galatians 5.17, Cassian defined flesh and spirit: 'Wherefore in this passage we ought to take "flesh" as meaning not man, i.e., his material substance, but the carnal will and evil desires, just as "spirit" does not mean anything material, but the good and spiritual desires of the soul'.<sup>34</sup> Things become slightly confusing. On the one hand, the will is the desire itself; yet, on the other hand, Cassian stated that the will was set in the middle of the two conflicting desires and was affected by the tension.<sup>35</sup> In any case, the will is not free, in the sense of perfect liberty, to choose right or wrong because of the carnality that resulted from the Fall, articulated explicitly in *Conference* twenty-three:

That sale under sin makes us carnal. What, I ask, or whose is that sin? Doubtless Adam's by whose fall, and, if I may say, ruinous transaction and fraudulent bargain we were sold. For when he was led astray...he brought all his descendants under the yoke of perpetual bondage...For by eating of the forbidden tree he received from the serpent the price of his liberty, and gave up his natural freedom and chose to give himself up to perpetual slavery... and thenceforth he was bound by this condition and not without reason subjected all the offspring of his posterity to perpetual service to him whose slave he had become...The original curse of God has made us carnal and condemned us to thorns and thistles, and our father has sold us by that unhappy bargain so that we cannot do the good that we would.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, Book XII.xiv, 283-284.

<sup>34</sup> Cassian, 'Works', Conference IV.xi, 333-334.

<sup>35</sup> Interestingly, according to Cassian, the tension is actually advantageous for 'it calls and urges us on to a higher state: and if it ceased, most surely there would ensue on the other hand a peace that is fraught with danger,' (Ibid., IV.vii, 333). The Semi-Pelagian view of concupiscence is therefore a more positive one than Augustine's, who saw it as only punishment (see Owen Chadwick, *Cassian*, 115; cf 94).

<sup>36</sup> Cassian, 'Works', Conference XXIII.xii-xiii, 526-527.

Though the desire for evil is strong, the desire for good still exists. This, then, isn't an Augustinian picture of total depravity—but it certainly isn't close to Pelagianism.

We will see, in *Conference* thirteen, an argument against total depravity which centres around the knowledge of good and evil.

### Conference XIII<sup>37</sup>

The thirteenth *Conference* is particularly interesting because it offers a more moderate view than what has been presented as 'mainline' Semi-Pelagianism—that is, that the will *always* takes the first step. Cassian's view here is that the will only *sometimes* takes the initial step. For this reason, it has been argued that *Conference* thirteen was evoked by the controversy of 427-434 rather than an instigator to it.<sup>38</sup>

We see, in *Conference* thirteen, the same kind of apparent inconsistency alluded to above. In the first seven chapters, Cassian argued for absolute dependence using the analogy of a farmer who toils over a crop which, despite his efforts, will not grow if there is no rain or sun, etc.<sup>39</sup> This is familiar—without God's grace there can be no progress; however, neither can there be progress if the monk doesn't do his part in seeking the grace that effects the change. Yet here Cassian ascribed even the effort to God's grace: 'For a man should consider...that he could not by his own strength apply those very efforts.'<sup>40</sup> In chapter six, Cassian applied the analogy to the moral life, arguing that because of weakness, no monk in his own strength could endure its rigours.<sup>41</sup> In the next chapter, we see the initial movement of the human will; however, here Cassian argued that God's

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<sup>37</sup> The 13<sup>th</sup> Conference is one of 24 in which Cassian gives summaries or reports on discussions at which he was present. In them, Cassian attempted to preach the ethical ideals of the Egyptian hermits (as to how much can be claimed to be Cassian's own thought, see Owen Chadwick, 18-19). *Conference XIII*, although entitled *The Third Conference of Abbot Chaeremon*, represents Cassian's own thought. Owen Chadwick states: 'It has been suggested that Cassian's opinions upon the theology of grace are reproducing Egyptian opinions, and the suggestion cannot lightly be dismissed. Nearly all eastern divinity was of Cassian's mind against Augustine's mind. But this *Conference* cannot have been delivered, even in substance, by Chaeremon, inasmuch as it betrays at every turn too intimate an acquaintance with Augustinian theology. When Prosper took up his pen on the side of Augustine, he attacked Cassian, not Chaeremon. He, a contemporary, recognized a literary form when he saw it' (20).

<sup>38</sup> It is widely held that the thirteenth *Conference* dates from about 426 which places it at the beginning of the controversy. If this is the case, Prosper's initial attacks would be largely influenced by it. Owen Chadwick, however, gives a persuasive argument to the contrary. Prosper is reacting to the view that the human will *always* takes the first step towards God. However, because Cassian's view as represented in the thirteenth *Conference* is that the human will only *sometimes* takes the initial step, Chadwick believes that the thirteenth *Conference* was evoked by the controversy rather than an instigator to it (see Owen Chadwick, *Cassian*, 129, footnote 1).

<sup>39</sup> Cassian, 'Works', Conference XIII.iii, 423.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, XIII.vi, 424-425.

grace *precedes* this: ‘...When His goodness sees in us even the very smallest spark of good will shining forth, *which He Himself has struck* as it were out of the hard flints of our hearts, He fans and fosters it’ (italics mine).<sup>42</sup> This is a picture of the will acting first, but here we see what has not been explicit: the conviction that the dictate to cut away the passions was not enough if grace did not already flow.

In case this appears to remove free will, Cassian proceeded to emphasise the capacity for human effort. I would argue, however, that this isn’t exactly like the pattern seen previously in book twelve of the *Institutes*. There, Cassian moved from utter dependence on grace to a successive view supported by his view of the human condition. In other words, there is utter dependence on grace because the passions are strong, yet one is able to ask and seek for that indispensable grace because—although the Fall has resulted in evil desires—the will to good remains. In *Conference* thirteen, he emphasised this with examples from Scripture (Zaccheus and the Good Thief).<sup>43</sup> Yet here the examples of those who make a first step are given in comparison with those who don’t. We see here a partial concession to Augustine—the indication that there are some for whom God must make the first move (Matthew and Peter); those whose souls are hurtling towards hell and need to be rescued—those in whom the flesh is winning the war described above. This, then, is a progression of *Conference* thirteen’s argument. These are the ones in whom God himself must strike the flint.

It may appear that Cassian is arguing that some people need preceding grace and others don’t. However, given what he has said elsewhere, I would argue that here Cassian is arguing that some need more help than others. He supported his comparison by supplying various texts that portrayed the mystery of God’s interaction with humanity:

But who can easily see how it is that the completion of our salvation is assigned to our own will, of which it is said: ‘If ye be willing, and hearken unto Me, ye shall eat the good things of the land,’ and how it is ‘not of him that willeth or runneth, but of God that hath mercy?’ What too is this, that God ‘will render to every man according to his works;’ and ‘it is God who worketh in you both to will and to do, of His good pleasure;’ and ‘this is not of yourselves but it is the gift of God...’ What is this too which is said: ‘Draw near to the Lord, and He will draw near to you,’ and what He says elsewhere: ‘No man cometh unto Me except the Father who sent Me draw Him?’<sup>44</sup>

For every text Augustine put forth to further his case, Cassian answered with a corresponding text in the will’s favour. These texts don’t so much support a

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid, XIII.vii, 425

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, XIII.xi, 427-428.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, XIII.ix, 426.

comparison between the need of help for some and the lack of need for others. Instead, they apply more rightly to the interplay between God and humanity in the context where grace precedes for all, but is needed more by some than others.

At this point in *Conference* thirteen, Cassian set out his view of the human condition in support of his claim that some are able to make the first move. This is the argument against total depravity alluded to above. Why is it that the will is not dead but has only been weakened? Why is it that after the Fall both evil and good desires exist in humanity? Cassian turned to Genesis 3 for his answer. The Fall resulted in humanity's knowledge of good and evil. Therefore, although the will is weak due to its bias towards evil, there remains the knowledge of good. He stated: 'Adam therefore after the fall conceived a knowledge of evil which he had not previously, but did not lose the knowledge of good which he had before.'<sup>45</sup>

Lest he be accused of inconsistency in his co-operative view, he went further and suggested two things. First, the capacity for the initial movement of the will was God-given in the sense that God created such capacity. This is beside the point. The crux must be what happens after the Fall. Second, Cassian argued that sometimes God left one alone as a means to strengthening the will. The absence of aiding grace was, in itself, an act of grace. Another interesting point, but beside the point. Nevertheless, I think Cassian needed only to emphasise the picture that one finds when Cassian is read as a whole. That is, because of the Fall and the war between the flesh and spirit, grace is an indispensable aid and, in that sense, all are utterly dependent on it, albeit in varying degrees. And it is to this I believe he returned and ended his challenge:

Experience proves that all the good in everyone is the work of the God of the universe. At one time he starts the soul upon its journey and first inspires the will. At another time he brings human works to a good issue, and gives the stability of virtue. At one time he recalls men back from the precipice though they do not wish to be called or do not even know. At another time he offers chances of salvation, and heads men off when their course is set upon death. He helps some who are already willing and running, and pushes into starting the unwilling who are not running. The God of all must be held to be working all goodness in everyone, stirring up, protecting, strengthening; but not in such a way as to destroy the free will which is his gift...If human logic seems opposed to this, it is best avoided...for how God works all good in everyone, and yet all is of free will, cannot be fully grasped by the mind of man.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid, XIII.xii, 428.

<sup>46</sup> Owen Chadwick's paraphrase of Conference XIII xviii, 434-435 (see *Cassian*, 125-126).

## CONCLUSION

‘Semi-Pelagianism’ is usually defined in terms of its distinction between *initium fidei* (the beginning of faith) and *augmentum fidei* (the increase of faith), often ascribing the former to the power of the free will and the latter (including faith itself) to the grace of God. The heart of the matter is that the will is capable of making the first step towards God. But is it as simple as that? Yes and no. It is as simple as that only if terms such as ‘power of the will’, ‘first step’, ‘capability’, etc. are informed by the context and the overall framework employed by the monks of southern Gaul.

Furthermore, when presented with the distinction between *initium fidei* and *augmentum fidei* we no doubt think of the initial movement of the will in terms of justification or definitive sanctification. But when the Semi-Pelagians spoke of the initial movement of the will, they did so from their experience, a context of the *journey of faith*; the *dynamic* interplay of seeking and receiving. Their view of human nature surely has implications for both the definitive and dynamic aspects of sanctification, but we misunderstand the context of the discussion if we assume it is primarily speaking to the former. For the Semi-Pelagians, the essence of the *very first* first movement would, no doubt, not be unlike the subsequent first movements along the way.

So, what shall we say when the swear word is thrown about? Are we Semi-Pelagian? Assuming there is unified ‘we’ to speak of at this conference, and that my answer affirms my participation in that ‘we’, I would say that:

1. Contrary to popular belief, the Semi-Pelagians spoke from an understanding of grace not unlike our own, and to ignore this is to misunderstand them;
2. We would affirm with them that the Fall has led to that sad state in which there is, for humanity, an inclination towards evil (I think it is safe to say there is disparity among those present when it comes to respective views on the extent of that inclination—some may find the Semi-Pelagian view more palatable than others);
3. The co-operation between God and humanity is, for the Semi-Pelagians, in the context of a never-ending struggle between the flesh and the spirit. At this point they are akin not to the Wesleyan-Arminian tradition (which argues that the war is not indicative of the Christian experience), but to the Reform position.

Finally, can this paper shed any light on the potential disparity referred to in point two, above? I think the difference in the personal experiences of Cassian and Augustine should not be ignored. As Chadwick states: ‘Cassian, a monk at least from the time he was a young man, perhaps a Christian from infancy, experienc[ed] no radical revolution in heart and mind and will; Augustine, who

found a chasm between his pagan and his new life, experienc[ed] the re-creation of his nature.<sup>47</sup> This was, perhaps, a disparity that Cassian attempted to portray with his contrast, gleaned from Scripture, between the Zaccheuses and the Matthews of this world. Many Christians who, from birth, have been surrounded by a community of grace influencing them for the good may not testify to a Damascus road experience. A better understanding of corporate sanctification may help to illuminate an understanding of corporate sin which, when taken together, make sense of the various experiences Cassian presented. Perhaps an appeal to his own corporate experience may have given Cassian the best defence of all.

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<sup>47</sup> Owen Chadwick, *Cassian*, 127.