

Study Guide for
Christianity: The Essentials
Learning from Scripture, the Creeds, and the Fathers

SESSION FIVE



A six-session discipleship series for
Epiclesis: An Ancient-Future Faith Community

The contents of this workbook were drawn primarily and in large measure from Christopher Hall's wonderful *Learning Theology with the Church Fathers*, which we gratefully acknowledge and highly recommend.
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Christianity: The Essentials

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Session Five

Sin, Grace, and the Human Condition.

The question of the means and the purpose of salvation. Will and choice. Learning from Irenaeus and Augustine. What does Scripture say? Learning from the Creed.

“The question of the means and the purpose of human salvation deeply interested, concerned and amazed the church fathers,” writes Christopher Hall. And, really, that mysterious subject is still one that amazes and confounds today. The Fathers tried to make sense of what is ultimately a mystery, and their important work not only survives but also continues to inform our beliefs today.

Key Questions...

And so the Fathers wrestled with more than a few weighty questions:

- What is sin and how did it enter God’s good creation?
- How does sin show itself in human behavior and why?
- How did Jesus’ ministry, especially on the cross, make redemption possible?
- What can people expect as they come into relationship with Jesus?
- Do we still struggle with sin, and is perfection possible?



Irenaeus on Sin and Salvation


The early Church Father Irenaeus (c.120-c.202) was a bishop in what is now Lyons, France. A student of Polycarp (who was a disciple of John), he lived at a time of rampant persecution and rampant Gnosticism. He believed Christians needed education and instruction in theology to understand and apply



the Scriptures, especially when it came to redemption. He died during a massacre of Christians at Lyons by the Romans. His work on a deeper conception of redemption (“recapitulation”) took Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, and especially Romans 5, and worked out the theological truth that Christ “sums up” all of humanity and also provides us with a “new beginning.” It all centers on the Incarnation, the human, flesh-and-blood existence of the Son of God. Irenaeus emphasized every point of Jesus’ life as necessary for salvation.


Irenaeus on Sin and Salvation

The first place Irenaeus would draw our attention is to Jesus’ words in Matt 23:37—the passage where He grieves over Jerusalem: “...how often I have desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing.”

 For Irenaeus, this word from Jesus presents “the ancient law of human liberty.” That is, from the beginning humans have had the power to choose freely to obey, or not. “There is no coercion with God,” he writes, “but a good will [towards us] is present with Him continually.”

For Irenaeus, God “placed the power of choice” in both humans and angels. Those who disobey God will experience divine judgment and are without excuse and “[pour] contempt upon His super-eminent goodness.” Humans, he believed, are all born of the same nature, able to hold fast and to do what is good, or, on the other hand, cast good aside in favor of disobedience.

Another place to look in Scripture, Irenaeus would say, is Romans 2 where Paul speaks of “glory and honor” being given by God to all those “that do good” (Rom 2:4-5, 7).

 Irenaeus said that those who receive glory and honor by God could only rightly receive it if they had the power not to obey.

So, we might well ask, was Irenaeus saying that humankind is born basically good? And, more to the point, was he saying that humans can choose good and live a life without sin?

The wider theological controversy over whether humans could live a sinless life— to always choose good over evil— came a bit later in Church history (as we'll see in just a moment with Pelagius and Augustine).

In the meantime, it's helpful for us simply to remember that Irenaeus was responding to second-century Gnostics who were attacking the idea that creation itself was bad— thereby claiming that humanity's basic nature made it *impossible* to respond to God in faith. Irenaeus' chief concern was to defend the basic goodness of creation, as God declared it to be, even after the Fall (another important doctrine of the Church, by the way).


Why is this point important? If creation itself from the start is bad, then flesh-and-blood humans *can't* respond to God in faith. And if that is the case, we can't be held accountable for choosing evil. Irenaeus' position, however, is that part of God's good, creative plan is that human beings are given the opportunity to recognize and pursue goodness *freely*.

One final Scripture about this freedom: To support his argument, Irenaeus turned again to Paul's encouragement to the Corinthians to "run their race in such a way as to gain the prize" (1 Cor 9:24-27). "We gain the crown," Irenaeus wrote, "through a strenuous exertion empowered by the intentional choice of a will exercised freely...."

Now, do you remember Pelagius and Augustine?

The argument over how much humans participate in their own salvation— our own choice in the matter— and the ability to live a sinless life came to a head in a theological showdown between Pelagius and Augustine.


A little background for you: Pelagius (c.354-420) was a monk and ascetic who denied the need for divine help in performing good works. For him, the only grace necessary from God was the declaration of His commandments. He also held that not all humans were wounded by Adam's sin, but merely influenced by it (the effects of the Fall were not hereditary) and therefore we are perfectly able to fulfill the law apart from any divine aid. He also, therefore, denied the more specific doctrine of original sin as developed by Augustine.

 *Main points to remember about Pelagius:* His optimistic view of both human nature and the Fall led him to believe that humans can live sinless lives through their “natural endowments” (created abilities of reason and will), and that they have a responsibility to do so.

It happened to fall to Augustine (354-430) to counter the Pelagian heresy. Augustine was Bishop of Hippo (present-day Algeria) and was a Latin-speaking philosopher and theologian. He was highly influential in the development of Western Christianity.

Augustine held fast to an emphasis on the absolute supremacy and sovereignty of God— and, equally important, the absolute depravity of humans. For Augustine, if humans are born with a sinful nature, then they must therefore possess an absolute helplessness and dependency on the grace of God.



 *Main points to remember about Augustine:* He developed the theological doctrine of “Monergism”, the belief that humans are entirely passive in the entirety of the process of salvation and that God is all-determining. You may recognize this doctrine: It became the historical and theological basis for the doctrines of Protestantism associated with John Calvin.

Augustine said that Pelagius committed three heresies:

- 1) Denied original sin;
- 2) Denied that God’s grace is essential for salvation;
- 3) Said that sinless perfection is possible apart from grace.

All humans, said Augustine, inherited Adam’s Fall and all deserve damnation unless they are baptized for the remission of sins and continue in that grace through faith.

And what about the free will that Irenaeus wrote about? Augustine famously said that “a man’s free will avails for nothing except to sin.” Grace is absolutely necessary, said Augustine, for any truly good decisions or actions on the part of any fallen human.

What did Augustine and Pelagius have to say about:

...the Fall?

Pelagius understood the Fall to be an event affecting only two people: Adam and Eve. Their descendants could learn from their bad choices, but every subsequent human being's nature was identical to Adam and Eve before the Fall.

Augustine understood the Fall to be drastic in its consequences, affecting all of humanity. Death of both the body and the soul entered the world because of it. (See 2 Chron 6:36; Psalm 143:2; Rom 5:6ff; Eph 2:1-3; Col 2:13; James 3:2). What are some of the theological implications of these lines of thinking?

...Human Choice?

Pelagius' argument was that God would not ask us to do something that we are incapable of doing, for if we *ought* to do something—choose good—then surely we *can* do it. So if the Fall affects all, then Pelagius says, we can't choose good.

Augustine contended that God's grace made up for the effects of the Fall and empowers us to choose good. "The house of my soul," he prayed, "is in ruins [from the Fall]; do Thou restore it." (See 2 Cor 12:9; Heb 4:15-16; 2 Pet 2:19; John 8:34; Rom 7:18ff). What are some of the theological implications of these two views?

...the Grace of God?

Pelagius said that grace can be found in human nature as created by God, but that it can be identified and called upon, as it were, through enlightenment and education of the law. Grace illumines the mind.

Augustine says that without God's grace, no mind can be illuminated, much less any soul be saved. (See Eph 2:4-10; Rom 3:21-25a; 1 John 1:8-10; Gal 2:21). What are some of the theological implications of these lines of thinking?

Summing Up:

It's important to note that after Augustine's death, there was a great debate about his very strict Monergism. The church in the West agreed with his criticisms of Pelagius, but many disagreed with his rigid views on sovereignty, election, and free will. It condemned Pelagianism but did not fully endorse Augustinianism. For their part, the Eastern church did not embrace Augustinianism and cleared Pelagius.

Who Won the Day? Augustine or Pelagius? (Did either?)

So, where did the early church “come down” on these issues? Was there consensus?

The orthodox view of the early church was neither entirely in Augustine's, nor Pelagius', “camp”, but rather a balanced (and, they believed) scripturally-based approach that looked like this:



The beginning of faith is an act of free will but the initiative comes from God. It requires free collaboration—a kind of interplay—between divine grace and human freedom. Humankind is not totally depraved: Even after the Fall, humans remain free and human nature, though “wounded in its natural powers”, has not been totally corrupted. The ability of the human will to respond to divine grace is itself an act of God's grace. When God touches a person's heart through the illumination of the Holy Spirit, that person is not inactive while receiving the inspiration, since he could reject it; and yet, without God's grace, humans cannot by their own free will move toward justice in God's sight. God initiates all the work, but the work of salvation requires a person's freedom.

Finally, what does the Creed teach us about Sin, Grace, and the Human Condition?

Take another look at the Nicene Creed (read it together) and talk a bit about what it says about the question of the means and the purpose of human salvation.

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light

from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father; through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became truly human. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father, who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets.

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.



Looking ahead: In our next session, The Resurrection of the Body and the Life Everlasting. The question of the resurrection. What does Scripture say? What did the Apostolic Fathers say and do?

About the cover art: "Saint Thomas Aquinas" by Bernardino Mei. c. 1660. Oil on canvas. From the Chigi-Saracini Collection, Sienna, Italy. It is featured on the cover of one of the sources for this study, *The Great Theologians*....

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This six-session discipleship series has been drawn from several sources in addition to Scripture:

Christopher Hall. *Learning Theology with the Church Fathers*. Downer's Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2002.

Gerald McDermott. *The Great Theologians: A Brief Guide*. Downer's Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010.

The Nicene Creed. Wiki article showing several English versions available at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English_versions_of_the_Nicene_Creed_in_current_use

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