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# HOW DID WE GET TO... THE DOCTRINE OF THE ORIGINAL SIN?

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## Discussion Guide

Have you ever wondered what people mean when they say “the doctrine of original sin”? You might think that it simply means “the first sin,” but in Christian theology the doctrine of original sin often means a doctrine about not just the first sin, but the guilt that all humanity carries because of “the first sin.” In this episode, we will explore how the idea of original sin became tied with original guilt. Sarah will argue that for Augustine of Hippo, one key thinker in the development of the doctrine of original sin, the doctrine was born out in his experience, attested to in Scripture, and tied to a strong doctrine of grace. Many branches of Christianity have wrestled with this theological inheritance, whether they agree with Augustine or not.

Questions for Discussion (you might find it helpful to read these questions before you watch the video):

1. What do you think of when you hear the term “original sin”?
2. What is your understanding of sin (original or otherwise)? Did any of the ideas about sin Sarah explored in the video confirm, challenge, or nuance your ideas?
3. Sarah argues that, for some people, Augustine’s picture of sin as a bondage from which people cannot escape without God’s intervention is compelling, even if they do not agree with Augustine on original guilt or predestination. What did you think about Augustine’s picture of sin in *The Confessions*?
4. What, if anything, do you find compelling about the notion of original sin as original guilt? What, if anything, do you find unconvincing about it?
5. Sarah describes Pelagius’s ideas about human capacity as “Nike theology” (just do it) and she suggests that some people who reject theological Pelagianism adhere to it in their economic or political thought. What do you think of that assertion? Are there ways in which your thinking is Pelagian (theologically, economically, or politically)? Do you think that is a good or a bad thing?
6. Sarah claims that, for Augustine, a strong doctrine of sin went along with a strong doctrine of grace. Do you think Augustine was right in making that connection? Do you think that

your understanding of what sin is and how grace operates align (even if they are different from what Augustine believed)?

Key Ideas (you can watch for these in the video and revisit them afterwards in your discussion):

1. The doctrine of original sin is usually meant as more than a doctrine about “the first sin.” Rather, it is a doctrine that holds that people are born both broken by and guilty for sin.
2. The doctrine of original sin as original guilt is not one shared by all Christians. Christians whose theological roots lie in Greek-speaking/Eastern Orthodox Christianity usually reject the notion of original sin as original guilt.
3. Augustine of Hippo was a key figure in the development of the doctrine of original sin. In his spiritual autobiography, *The Confessions* he describes sin as a kind of bondage from which people can only be saved through God’s direct intervention. While not yet the fully developed doctrine of original sin, this picture does show Augustine’s conviction that people could not compel themselves to love God.
4. Augustine’s strong doctrine of original sin was worked out in debate with Pelagius and Pelagius’s followers. Pelagius believed that human beings had agency and the capacity not to sin.
5. Augustine’s doctrine of original sin went with a belief in predestination. Since people were powerless to love God without God’s intervention, only those with whom God chose to intervene would love God. For Augustine, both a strong doctrine of original sin and predestination aligned with a strong doctrine of grace.

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## Video Outline

### I. Introduction

A. The doctrine of original sin, as it has been articulated in traditional Catholic and Protestant theology, includes the idea that people are born guilty and, even from birth, are justly condemned by God for their sinful natures.

1. For some Western Christians, original sin has often gone together with another doctrine, predestination, or the belief that humans do not have free will to choose God or evil.

B. Doctrines of original sin or predestination have not been a universally accepted doctrine in the Christian Church. The Eastern Orthodox tradition rejects both, at least as they have been worked out by many Western theologians.

C. In this video, we are going to explore the development of the doctrine of original sin.

D. Thesis: The history of doctrine of original sin illuminates larger debates about human nature, sin, and grace. The history is also helpful in understanding the terms of debates in Western Christianity.

### II. Some Background and Terms

A. Roman Empire was linguistically split between Latin (western empire) and Greek speakers (eastern empire).

1. Other differences between the two linguistic regions related to papal primacy (i.e. authority of the Pope) and the political situation (western empire falls earlier than the eastern empire).

B. Term Clarification

1. Greek-speaking/Eastern Christianity = Christianity that became identified with the various Eastern Orthodox churches.

2. Latin-speaking/ Western Christianity = branch of Christianity that gave rise to Catholicism and eventually Protestantism.

- a) This is the branch that articulates an understanding of original sin as original guilt and of predestination as God choosing some people for salvation and either allowing or choosing the damnation of others.

### III. Augustine, Pelagius, and Original Sin

#### A. Augustine of Hippo

1. North African bishop who wrote about his long journey to Christianity in *The Confessions*.
2. In *The Confessions*, Augustine describes his pre-Christian self as a self-divided. Part of him wants to do what he understands to be good and holy, but he also wanted what was not good and holy.: “I thus came to understand from my own experience what I had read, how the flesh lusts against the spirit and the spirit strives against the flesh. I was aligned with both, but more with the desires I approved in myself than with those I frowned upon, for in these latter I was not really the agent, since for the most part I was enduring them against my will rather than acting freely. All the same, the force of habit that fought against me had grown fiercer by my own doing, because I had come willingly to this point where I now wished not to be.”
3. According to Augustine, only God can come in from the outside and free people from the chains of sin and infuses people with love of God.
4. Augustine presents a strong picture of sin in *The Confessions*, but his strong doctrine of original sin as original guilt will be more fully developed during a controversy later in his life.

#### B. The Pelagian Controversy

1. Pelagius: a monk who disagreed with Augustine’s picture of human sin and capability.
  - a) Pelagius taught that God had created humans with free will and that the fall had not altered the human capacity to choose the good.
  - b) For Pelagius, God’s grace was manifest in God creating people with free will and then in giving to humanity the law, the prophets, and the teaching and example of Jesus so that they knew what God wanted them to do.
  - c) Pelagius’s context: The fourth-century Roman toleration of Christianity had, according to some Christians, led to moral laxity.
  - d) Pelagius concerned with emphasizing God’s goodness and believed that a strong doctrine of human fallenness undermined belief in God’s goodness.

#### C. Augustine on Pelagius.

1. The ability to choose the good on his own had not been Augustine's experience.
2. Augustine did not think Pelagius's view was biblical.
  - a) In the Latin translation Augustine had, Romans 5:12 says "By one man sin entered the world, and death by sin; so death passed upon all men, for in him all men sinned." As a point of reference, the NRSV translation says "Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned."
    - (1) Note the difference: in him all men sinned versus "because all have sinned."
  - b) Many theologians and commentators suggest that the Latin translation of the verse from the Greek was a bad translation, particularly that phrase "in him all men sinned."
  - c) In sum: Augustine believed that all people sinned when Adam sinned. Thus, for Augustine, people carried both the effects of sin—death, corruption and the like—and also the guilt of sin. We all sinned in Adam and were all responsible for sin. That's original guilt.
3. Implications of Augustine's view of original sin as original guilt
  - a) According to Augustine, after the fall, people could not choose not to sin on our own.
  - b) Augustine thought that the transmission of sin was connected to sex and procreation.
  - c) For Augustine, a strong doctrine of predestination or the notion that God chooses some and not others for salvation.
4. More on original sin and predestination
  - a) For Augustine, people are bound by sin and cannot choose the good. They cannot will themselves to love God.
    - (1) That inability is both a lack of freedom and a sin for which people can be justly punished (all people sinned in Adam so all are guilty).
    - (2) The only possibility of salvation comes from God infusing people with love.
  - b) For Augustine, it is clear that God chooses some and not others.
    - (1) Biblical evidence: Paul discussion of election in Romans.

(2) In response to questions about God's justice, Augustine says that no one deserves grace. This logic even extended to unbaptized babies that died.

D. The history of the controversy

1. Debate was originally between Pelagius and Augustine and then extended to Pelagius's followers.

a) Celestius taught an even more exaggerated form of Pelagianism than Pelagius and was condemned at a council at Carthage in 412.

b) Julian of Eclanum was a bishop who lost his see for refusing to sign a letter condemning Pelagius and Celestius.

(1) In the arguments with Julian, Augustine develops his strongest statements regarding original guilt and predestination.

E. Some points about Augustine to consider.

1. Augustine understood himself as defending the grace of God.

a) With a strong doctrine of original sin, there is no doubt that people need grace.

2. Augustine raises good questions about how humans work.

a) Augustine describes people as being more driven by what they love than by what they know.

b) If Augustine is right, it is worth asking if we attend as much to formation as we should.

3. Augustine's theology profoundly shaped Western theology, both Catholic and Protestant. Even groups that rejected his notion of original guilt and predestination have still had to deal with them. In other words, Augustine set up the debates and vocabulary that would shape Western theology for a very long time.

IV. Eastern Orthodoxy and Original Sin as Original Guilt.

A. Eastern Orthodoxy (from the Greek-speaking East) never accepted the idea of original guilt.

1. Eastern theologians did not think it could make sense for people to be held responsible for something that they did not do.

B. Eastern Orthodoxy had and has a doctrine of sin and its effects.

1. Eastern orthodox Christians understood sin as introducing death and corruption into God's good creation.

a) Orthodox theologians held that people were not responsible for sin's presence in the world, but they were certainly affected by it.

(1) One of those effects: a weakened constitution that made it likely that people themselves would sin and would then be responsible for those sins.

C. Eastern theologians had a doctrine of grace.

1. Humanity needed to be reunited with God and that initiative came from God's side (so it is grace).

2. Eastern theologians described salvation in synergistic or cooperative terms.

a) People must participate or grow in that grace. There was more room for human cooperation and agency in salvation than there was in at least some of the Western theologies influenced by Augustine.

D. In sum, the Eastern way of thinking does not map well onto the various sides of the Pelagian controversy. The framework and terms were simply different.

## V. Conclusion

A. In the early centuries of the church, the idea that something had gone profoundly wrong with creation was widely shared, but the specific doctrine that often goes under the name "original sin," a doctrine that includes the notion of original guilt, is largely associated with Augustine and Western Christianity.

B. The way Augustine articulated the doctrine of original, particularly amid the Pelagian Controversy, created a set of theological ideas and questions that people in the Latin-speaking West—and the traditions that came out of the Latin-speaking West—would wrestle with. These questions include:

1. How tightly are bound people to sin?

2. What, if anything, does free will have to do with sin?

3. If God must elect or predestine people, why not everyone? What does this say about the justice of God?

4. Is human freedom or action compatible with God's freedom?

C. Some Questions to Consider:

1. If Augustine is wrong about sin, why is the world so messed up?

2. Do we sometimes translate Augustine's theological idea of predestination in to an economic, social, or political one?

a) If we happen to be the fortunate, do we sometimes tell ourselves that we are chosen or special or elect?

b) Are we secular Pelagians, telling others that if they just try hard enough or do more, they can be successful or healthy?

c) Do we sometimes give too much credit to human capability—particularly when we are judging how much other people should be able to do for themselves?



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## Glossary

**Augustine of Hippo:** bishop and theologian; wrote the spiritual autobiography *The Confessions*. A key thinker in the development of the doctrine of original sin as original guilt.

**Celestius:** follower of Pelagius; ideas were condemned at the Council of Carthage.

**Julian of Eclanum:** former bishop who refused to sign a statement condemning Pelagius and Celestius; Julian continued the debate about sin and human agency with Augustine.

**Pelagius:** monk opposed to Augustine's understanding of sin and human agency. Pelagius believed that people could choose not to sin and that God's grace was manifest in giving the law and the example of Jesus to follow.

**Predestination:** idea that God chooses the eternal destiny of individuals (although the term has been interpreted to mean other things).