The Reformations: Original Sin and Baptism

Any discussion of 16th century ideas about Original Sin has to be grounded in the writings of St. Augustine of Hippo, the bishop saint of the late 4th and early 5th centuries. In addition, one needs to understand the context in which he wrote: the Pelagian heresy.

Augustine and the Pelagian Heresy

The teachings of Pelagianism directly challenged the prevailing Christian understanding of original sin, human nature, and the role of divine grace in salvation. At the core of Pelagianism was the belief that human beings have the capacity to achieve moral perfection and salvation through their own free will and effort, without necessarily relying on God's grace. Pelagius denied the doctrine of original sin, arguing that Adam's sin in the Garden of Eden affected only himself and not the entire human race. He believed that individuals are born in the same moral state as Adam before the fall, with the ability to choose between good and evil without any inherent inclination towards sin.

According to Pelagius, human beings possess the innate ability to lead morally upright lives and to fulfill the commandments of God through the proper exercise of their free will. He argued that God's grace was not necessary for the initial act of faith or for living a righteous life. Pelagianism emphasized human moral effort and the importance of personal merit in attaining salvation.

Pelagius and his followers also held that the grace of God was not a supernatural gift that enables human beings to perform acts of righteousness or to resist temptation. They viewed divine grace more as a form of external assistance, such as the teachings of Scripture and the example of Christ, that could provide guidance and inspiration but were not essential for salvation.

The teachings of Pelagius were condemned by various Church councils and bishops as heretical. The Council of Carthage in 418, for example, formally denounced Pelagianism and affirmed the doctrine of original sin and the necessity of divine grace for salvation. The Church maintained that human beings, due to the effects of original sin, are incapable of achieving salvation by their own efforts alone and are in need of God's grace and redemption through Jesus Christ. The Church affirmed that salvation is a gift from God, received through faith in Jesus Christ, and that human beings are completely dependent on God's grace for their reconciliation and moral transformation.

Augustine vehemently opposed the teachings of Pelagius and considered them to be heretical. He argued that Pelagius and his followers underestimated the effects of original sin on human nature and overestimated the capacity of human beings to attain moral perfection and salvation through their own efforts.

In response to Pelagianism, Augustine emphasized the doctrine of original sin. He taught that as a result of Adam and Eve's disobedience in the Garden of Eden, all human beings inherit a fallen nature and a propensity towards sin. Augustine believed that this inherited sinfulness is passed down through generations, leaving humanity in a state of moral corruption and spiritual inability to please God or choose the path of righteousness on its own.

Furthermore, Augustine stressed the absolute necessity of divine grace in the process of salvation. He argued that human beings are entirely dependent on God's unmerited favor and transformative grace to overcome their fallen nature, be reconciled with God, and attain eternal life. Augustine believed that God's grace is not merely external assistance or guidance but a supernatural gift that works within individuals, enabling them to have faith, repent of their sins, and live a righteous life.

To combat Pelagianism, Augustine wrote extensively on these theological concepts. His works, such as "On the Grace of Christ" and "The City of God," provided a robust defense of the doctrines of original sin and divine grace while refuting Pelagian arguments. Augustine's writings significantly influenced the Western Christian tradition and played a crucial role in shaping the Church's understanding of sin, grace, and salvation.

Ultimately, Augustine's response to Pelagianism emphasized the radical dependence of human beings on God's grace for salvation, highlighting the insufficiency of human effort and the absolute need for divine intervention in the redemption and transformation of fallen humanity. His theological insights helped establish a more balanced and nuanced understanding of the relationship between human will and divine grace in the Christian understanding of salvation.

Augustine's view on the relationship of grace, faith, and good works is a significant aspect of his theological teachings. He developed a nuanced understanding that emphasized the primacy of God's grace while acknowledging the roles of faith and good works in the Christian life.

Primacy of Grace:

>Augustine believed that salvation and any good works performed by individuals are ultimately the result of God's grace. He emphasized that it is only through God's unmerited favor and transformative grace that human beings can be reconciled to God and receive the gift of salvation. Augustine taught that God's grace is freely given, not earned or deserved, and it is the initiating and sustaining force behind all aspects of the Christian life.

Faith:

>For Augustine, faith played a central role in the Christian life. He believed that faith is a gift of God's grace and that it is necessary for salvation. Augustine understood faith as a personal trust and reliance on God, accepting and embracing the truths revealed in Scripture and the person of Jesus Christ. Faith, in his view, is the means by which individuals receive and respond to God's grace, opening themselves to the transformative work of the Holy Spirit.

Good Works:

>Augustine acknowledged the importance of good works in the life of a Christian but stressed that they are a result of God's grace and not the means of earning salvation. He taught that good works are the fruits of a living faith and an expression of love for God and one's neighbor. Augustine emphasized that genuine good works are performed by individuals who have been regenerated by God's grace and motivated by love, rather than by seeking to earn merit or salvation.

Augustine's views on the necessity of good works for salvation can be somewhat nuanced and have led to different interpretations. At times, Augustine's writings may seem to suggest that good works are not necessary for salvation in the strict sense. However, it is important to consider the context and development of his thought.

In his early writings, Augustine emphasized the primacy of God's grace and the belief that salvation is solely a result of God's unmerited favor. He strongly rejected any notion that human works can earn salvation or contribute to it in a way that diminishes the necessity of God's grace. Augustine argued that human beings are utterly dependent on God's grace for their redemption and that even the ability to perform good works is itself a gift of God's grace.

However, as Augustine's theology developed, he recognized the importance of good works as the fruit and evidence of genuine faith and the transformative work of grace in a person's life. Augustine taught that

those who are truly saved and have received God's grace will naturally produce good works as a result of their faith and love for God. Good works, for Augustine, were seen as a necessary response to God's grace and a manifestation of the transformative power of the Holy Spirit working within believers.

In this sense, Augustine viewed good works as necessary in the sense of being an inevitable outworking of genuine faith and an expression of love for God and neighbor. While he did not see them as meritorious or capable of earning salvation, he considered them as integral to the Christian life and as evidence of a person's genuine relationship with God.

It is worth noting that Augustine's teachings on this matter can be complex and may not always be completely consistent throughout his writings. As with any theologian, his ideas evolved and developed over time. Different interpretations of Augustine's views on the necessity of good works for salvation have emerged among scholars and theologians.

In summary, Augustine's view on the relationship of grace, faith, and good works highlights the primacy of God's grace in salvation. He taught that faith is the means by which individuals receive God's grace, and good works are the fruit of that grace-filled faith. Augustine emphasized the necessity of divine grace as the foundation of salvation and the transformative power that enables believers to live a life characterized by love and good works.

Augustine and Baptism

In the context of the Pelagian controversy, Augustine strongly asserted the necessity of baptism for salvation. The teachings of Pelagius and his followers undermined the significance of baptism by minimizing the effects of original sin and suggesting that individuals could attain righteousness and salvation through their own moral efforts.

Augustine, on the other hand, emphasized the sacramental nature of baptism and its role in the forgiveness of sins, including the cleansing of original sin. He believed that baptism was an essential means by which God imparts His grace and initiates the process of salvation in an individual's life.

Augustine taught that through baptism, an individual is united with Christ and becomes a member of His body, the Church. He viewed baptism as the sacrament through which a person is spiritually reborn, regenerated, and made a new creation in Christ. Augustine believed that baptism brings about the forgiveness of sins, including the removal of the guilt of original sin, and imparts the grace necessary for salvation.

Furthermore, Augustine argued that baptism was not merely a symbolic act but an effective means of grace instituted by Christ Himself. He emphasized that the efficacy of baptism did not depend on the personal merits or understanding of the one being baptized but on the power of God working through the sacrament. Augustine believed that even infants could and should be baptized to receive the benefits of baptism and the grace of God.

In his polemics against the Pelagians, Augustine defended the necessity of baptism as a means of receiving God's grace and entering into the process of salvation. He believed that baptism was a divine ordinance that should not be undermined or downplayed by the teachings of Pelagianism, which emphasized human moral effort over the sacramental means of grace.

It is important to note that Augustine's views on baptism were shaped by the specific theological controversies and debates of his time, particularly in response to Pelagianism. While he stressed the

importance of baptism for salvation, his overall theological framework also emphasized the primacy of God's grace in all aspects of salvation.

The 16th Century Reformation: Original Sin

In the 16th century, there were significant differences in the understanding of original sin between Catholic and Lutheran thought. These differences played a central role in the theological debates and conflicts of the Protestant Reformation. I will outline some key distinctions below:

Nature of Original Sin:

> Catholic Thought: The Catholic Church taught that original sin, inherited from Adam and Eve's disobedience, resulted in the loss of original righteousness and brought about a corruption of human nature. Original sin was seen as a state of spiritual and moral deprivation that weakened but did not completely destroy human free will. Catholic theology maintained that baptism removed the guilt of original sin and initiated a process of sanctification.

> Lutheran Thought: Martin Luther, the leading figure of the Lutheran Reformation, emphasized a more radical view of original sin. He taught that original sin completely corrupted human nature and rendered individuals spiritually dead and incapable of any good apart from God's grace. Luther believed that human beings were enslaved to sin and unable to choose God or participate in their own salvation without divine intervention.

> Calvin taught that original sin resulted in a radical corruption of human nature. He believed that the fall of Adam and Eve not only brought guilt and condemnation upon humanity but also corrupted every aspect of human beings, including their intellect, emotions, and will. This corruption, known as "total depravity," means that every part of human nature is affected by sin, leaving humans completely incapable of seeking God or doing anything truly good apart from God's grace.

Transmission of Original Sin:

> Catholic Thought: The Catholic Church taught that original sin is transmitted through natural generation, meaning that all human beings inherit original sin through biological descent from Adam and Eve. Baptism was considered necessary to cleanse infants from original sin and initiate them into the life of grace.

> Lutheran Thought: Luther also believed in the transmission of original sin through natural generation. However, he emphasized that baptism was primarily a means of faith, not just a ritual, and that it was the means by which God's grace was personally received and appropriated by the individual. Luther rejected the idea that baptism automatically removes all the effects of original sin or guarantees salvation without genuine faith.

> Calvin shared the traditional Augustinian belief that original sin is transmitted through natural generation. He believed that all human beings inherit a sinful nature from Adam and are born in a state of sin. This inheritance means that every individual is born into a condition of spiritual bondage and separation from God.

Role of Free Will:

> Catholic Thought: Catholic theology maintained that human free will was wounded by original sin but not completely eradicated. Individuals still retained a measure of freedom to cooperate with

God's grace and choose the good. The sacraments, particularly baptism and the Eucharist, were seen as channels of grace that restored and strengthened human free will.

Lutheran Thought: Luther rejected the idea that fallen human beings possess free will in spiritual matters. He taught that the will is in bondage to sin and cannot choose God or contribute to its own salvation. Luther emphasized the sovereignty of God's grace in the process of salvation and the necessity of faith, which he viewed as a gift of God, in appropriating that grace.

Calvin's view on free will is commonly referred to as "total inability" or "bondage of the will." He argued that fallen human beings, as a result of original sin, are spiritually dead and unable to turn to God or choose Him of their own accord. The will is in bondage to sin and enslaved to its desires. Therefore, individuals cannot exercise true faith or cooperate with God's grace apart from the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit.

Calvin emphasized the sovereignty of God's grace in salvation, asserting that God alone initiates and completes the work of redemption. He taught that God's grace is irresistible and efficacious, meaning that when God chooses to extend His grace to an individual, that person will inevitably respond with faith. In this view, the will is not a determining factor in salvation but is itself a recipient of God's gracious activity.

The 16th Century Reformation: Baptism

Catholic Perspective:

In the Catholic Church during the 16th century, the understanding of original sin was rooted in the teachings of Augustine of Hippo. The discussion above reflects the Catholic understanding: original sin was seen as a state of spiritual corruption and the loss of original holiness and justice that occurred due to Adam and Eve's transgression. The Catholic Church taught that this sin was transmitted to all humanity through natural generation, with each person being born with the guilt of original sin. Baptism was considered necessary to remove this guilt and regenerate individuals to a state of grace. Like Augustine, the Catholic Church emphasized the sacramental nature of baptism, its role in the forgiveness of sins, including the cleansing of original sin as an action of God by which He imparts unmerited grace.

The Protestant Reformers, such as Martin Luther and John Calvin, challenged the Catholic understanding of original sin and proposed alternative interpretations. They sought to reform the existing Church practices and teachings they believed had deviated from the true essence of Christianity.

Lutheran Perspective

Martin Luther, a central figure in the Protestant Reformation, did not fully accept Augustine's view on the necessity of baptism for salvation. While Luther acknowledged the sacramental nature of baptism and its significance in the Christian life, he had distinct theological differences with Augustine's understanding of baptism and its role in salvation.

Luther's theology was deeply shaped by his understanding of justification by faith alone. He emphasized that salvation is received solely by faith in Jesus Christ and His redemptive work on the cross, apart from any human effort or merit. Luther believed that faith was the means by which an individual is justified and receives the forgiveness of sins, and he viewed this faith as a gift of God's grace.

Regarding baptism, Luther recognized its importance as a visible sign and seal of God's grace. He affirmed that baptism is a means by which God imparts His promises and communicates His grace to the believer. Luther taught that through baptism, a person is united with Christ and shares in His death and resurrection.

However, Luther diverged from Augustine in his understanding of the efficacy and necessity of baptism for salvation. He argued that it is faith in Christ, not the act of baptism itself, that justifies and saves an individual. Luther believed that faith can exist without baptism, and baptism does not guarantee salvation if it is not accompanied by genuine faith. He stressed that it is faith alone that lays hold of God's promises and receives the benefits of salvation.

Luther's emphasis on justification by faith alone led him to question the traditional Catholic teaching that baptism automatically and infallibly confers saving grace. He believed that God's grace could operate outside the specific act of baptism and that salvation was ultimately a matter of faith and trust in Christ.

The Reformed Perspective

John Calvin, affirmed the sacramental (sign) nature of baptism and its significance in the life of a believer. He taught that baptism is a visible sign and seal of God's covenant of grace, through which believers are incorporated into the body of Christ and receive the benefits of salvation. Calvin viewed baptism as a means by which God communicates His grace and initiates individuals into the Christian community.

Similar to Augustine, Calvin believed that baptism is more than just a symbolic act; it is an effective means by which God imparts His grace, but he also acknowledged that the efficacy of baptism depends on the faith of the individual receiving it.

He rejected the idea of baptismal regeneration, which suggests that the act of baptism itself brings about salvation or forgiveness of sins apart from faith. Calvin emphasized the necessity of faith in order for baptism to have its full effect. He believed that faith is the instrument by which the believer lays hold of God's promises and receives the benefits signified and sealed in baptism.

Given Calvin's idea of predestination and the complete bondage of the will, it reduces Baptism, although called a "sacrament", to a public ceremony, while means of grace, if one is not among the elect, then Baptism is really reduced to ceremony only.

The Radical Reformers' Perspective:

The **Anabaptists**, a radical wing of the Protestant Reformation, held differing views on the necessity of baptism for salvation, and their beliefs varied within different Anabaptist groups and individuals. However, in general, the Anabaptists diverged from Augustine's view on the necessity of infant baptism for salvation.

The Anabaptists, as their name suggests (meaning "rebaptizers"), emphasized adult baptism as a crucial aspect of their faith. They argued that only those who had reached an age of understanding and made a personal confession of faith should be baptized. They rejected the practice of infant baptism, considering it invalid because it was done without the individual's conscious acceptance of faith.

While the Anabaptists recognized the significance of baptism as a public expression of faith and obedience to Christ's command, they viewed it primarily as an outward symbol and testimony of an individual's personal faith and commitment to follow Jesus. They believed that baptism was a

response of obedience to Christ's teachings rather than a means of salvation itself. They emphasized the importance of a personal, inward faith in Jesus Christ as the basis of salvation.

Therefore, the Anabaptists did not hold to the idea of baptismal regeneration, which asserts that the act of baptism itself brings about salvation or forgiveness of sins. Instead, they viewed baptism as a public declaration of one's faith and identification with the community of believers.

It is important to note that the Anabaptist movement was diverse, and different individuals and groups among the Anabaptists held variations in their beliefs and practices. While many Anabaptists rejected infant baptism and emphasized adult baptism as a voluntary act of faith, the specific theological views on the necessity of baptism for salvation may have varied within the movement.

Overall, while the Anabaptists held a high regard for baptism as a significant act of obedience and public witness, they did not generally share Augustine's view on the necessity of infant baptism or the sacramental efficacy of baptism in terms of bringing about salvation.