

Monergism vs. Synergism – Part 1

Augustinianism, Pelagianism, and Semi-Pelagianism

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<http://bit.ly/d24EHD>

In 1914, B.B. Warfield gave a series of lectures at Princeton. The lectures were later compiled into a book; *The Plan of Salvation*. In the section titled *Autosoterism*, Warfield states:

There are fundamentally only two doctrines of salvation: that salvation is from God, and that salvation is from ourselves. The former is the doctrine of common Christianity; the latter is the doctrine of universal heathenism.¹

These two doctrines of salvation are known as Monergism and Synergism. In this article, I will attempt to define and illustrate each view; in a subsequent article, I will look at the Apostle John's affirmation of Monergism in his Gospel. In a third article, I will present an edited transcript of a sermon that I preached on the topic; in a fourth article, I will look at each views inherent implications to the Great Commission.

Definitions

Theopedia defines Monergism as “the belief that the Holy Spirit is the only agent who effects the regeneration of Christians²”; and defines Synergism as “essentially the view that God and humanity work together, each contributing their part to accomplish salvation in and for the individual³.”

Got Questions Ministries (in an article titled *Monergism vs. synergism – which view is correct?*) provides a similar definition of both terms:

Monergism, which comes from a compound word in Greek that means “to work alone,” is the view that God alone effects our salvation.

Synergism, which also comes from a compound Greek word meaning “to work together,” is the view that God works together with us in effecting salvation.⁴

John Hendryx (in his article titled *Monergism vs. Synergism*) writes:

Synergism is the doctrine that the act of being born again is achieved through a combination of human will and divine grace.⁵

¹ B.B. Warfield, *The Plan of Salvation*. (General Books LLC, 2009). Warfield's text is also available online at <<http://bit.ly/c75DDj>>.

² Theopedia. <<http://bit.ly/a9yUgg>> (accessed 3 October 2010).

³ Theopedia. <<http://bit.ly/drP70B>> (accessed 3 October 2010).

⁴ Got Questions Ministries. <<http://bit.ly/LKQfD>> (accessed 3 October 2010).

⁵ John Hendryx. <<http://bit.ly/cjOc0X>> (accessed 3 October 2010).

Hendryx also notes:

Synergists believe that faith itself, a principle standing independent and autonomous of God's action of grace, is something the natural man must add or contribute toward the price of his salvation.⁶

In contrast, he shows that Monergism teaches:

Salvation is entirely a work of God... man can contribute nothing toward the price of his salvation and that one is saved wholly and unconditionally by grace through faith.⁷

J.I. Packer, in his introductory essay to John Owen's *Death of Death*, gives further explanation of the difference between the two salvation views. He writes:

Now, here are two coherent interpretations of the biblical gospel, which stand in evident opposition to each other. The difference between them is not primarily one of emphasis, but of content. One proclaims a God who saves; the other speaks of a God Who enables man to save himself.

One makes salvation depend on the work of God, the other on a work of man; one regards faith as part of God's gift of salvation, the other as man's own contribution to salvation; one gives all the glory of saving believers to God, the other divides the praise between God, Who, so to speak, built the machinery of salvation, and man, who by believing operated it.⁸

The conflict between these two views is not new. It has existed for close to 1600 years of church history. Let us take a journey to the 5th century and look at the contention between Augustinianism, Pelagianism, and Semi-Pelagianism. Each of these views approached man's participation in salvation differently.

1. Augustinianism – Salvation accomplished by God alone
2. Pelagianism – Salvation accomplished by man alone
3. Semi-Pelagianism – Salvation accomplished by God and man working together

The divergent views are sourced in their presuppositions regarding the effect of the sin of Adam on man's spiritual nature and the condition of his heart. In my understanding it has helped to define the views in their approach to the spiritual deadness of man.

1. Augustinianism – the completely-dead view
2. Pelagianism – the not-dead view

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ John Owen, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust), 4. Packer's essay is also available online at <<http://bit.ly/t67Go>>.

3. Semi-Pelagianism – the mostly-dead view

Augustinianism

The Augustinian view declares that Adam's sin has brought spiritual incapacitation to mankind. Man not only cannot but will not do anything that is pleasing to God. In presenting the completely-dead view, Theopedia shows Augustinianism affirming:

Due to the corruption of human nature in the Fall, one's will is not free, but rather a slave to sin. As such, every person is born sinful and justly under the condemnation of God. In order for a person to be delivered from this dreadful state (i.e. saved), God must intervene.⁹

In his *Outlines of Theology*, A.A. Hodge, with regard to original sin, notes: "every man brings into the world with him a nature already so corrupt, that it can do nothing but sin."¹⁰

Philip Schaff, who devotes a fair number of pages in his *History of the Christian Church* to a discussion of the divergent views, writes:

To understand Augustine's doctrine of the fall of man, we must remember, first of all, that he starts with the idea of the organic unity of the human race, and with the profound parallel of Paul between the first and the second Adam; that he views the first man not merely as an individual, but at the same time as the progenitor and representative of the whole race, standing to natural mankind in the same relation as that of Christ to redeemed and regenerate mankind.¹¹

Pelagianism

In contrast to Augustinianism, the Pelagian view affirms that Adam's disobedience only affected *him*, and that individuals are born with the innocence with which Adam was created. Man therefore has the capability to choose whether or not to follow in Adam's disobedience.

In presenting the not-dead view, Theopedia shows Pelagianism teaching:

That man has an unimpaired moral ability to choose that which is spiritually good and possesses the free will, ability, and capacity to do that which is spiritually good. This resulted in a gospel of salvation based on human works. Man could choose to follow the precepts of God and then follow those precepts because he had the power within himself to do so.¹²

⁹ Theopedia. <<http://bit.ly/9kOAul>> (accessed 3 October 2010).

¹⁰ A.A Hodge, "Outlines of Theology: Pelagianism, Semi-Pelagianism & Augustinianism." <<http://bit.ly/aRQ8Ea>> (accessed 3 October 2010).

¹¹ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 3. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Christianity*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), 824.

¹² Theopedia. <<http://bit.ly/93nQYU>> (accessed 3 October 2010).

Warfield notes:

The Pelagian scheme therefore embraces the following points. God has endowed man with an inalienable freedom of will, by virtue of which he is fully able to do all that can be required of him. To this great gift God has added the gifts of the law and the gospel to illuminate the way of righteousness and to persuade man to walk in it; and even the gift of Christ to supply an expiation for past sins for all who will do righteousness, and especially to set a good example. Those who, under these inducements and in the power of their ineradicable freedom, turn from their sins and do righteousness, will be accepted by the righteous God and rewarded according to their deeds.¹³

Schaff contrasts Pelagianism with Augustinianism and notes:

The soul of the Pelagian system is human freedom; the soul of the Augustinian is divine grace. Pelagius starts from the natural man, and works up, by his own exertions, to righteousness and holiness. Augustine despairs of the moral sufficiency of man, and derives the new life and all power for good from the creative grace of God. The one system proceeds from the liberty of choice to legalistic piety; the other from the bondage of sin to the evangelical liberty of the children of God.¹⁴

He adds:

The one loves to admire the dignity and strength of man; the other loses itself in adoration of the glory and omnipotence of God. The one flatters natural pride, the other is a gospel for penitent publicans and sinners.¹⁵

R.C. Sproul (in an article titled, *Augustine and Pelagius*) writes:

Pelagius recoiled in horror at the idea that a divine gift (grace) is necessary to perform what God commands. For Pelagius and his followers responsibility always implies ability. If man has the moral responsibility to obey the law of God, he must also have the moral ability to do it.¹⁶

Dave Noffsinger (in an article titled *Calvinism Illustrated*¹⁷) affirms the Pelagian view in the following illustration:

1. I chose from birth to love my younger daughter because I thought it was my right as the father and chose to hate my eldest daughter because of that

¹³ Warfield. <<http://bit.ly/d6cwSX>>. (accessed 3 October 2010).

¹⁴ Schaff, 787.

¹⁵ Ibid, 788.

¹⁶ R.C. Sproul. <<http://bit.ly/4eIcae>> (accessed 3 October 2010).

¹⁷ Dave Noffsinger. <<http://bit.ly/cXNBlr>> (accessed 3 October 2010).

same right. Neither child had done anything right or wrong but because of my sovereign will I simply chose to hate one and to love the other.

2. Because of this choice, I would send the eldest out into the world and cut her completely from my will and fellowship while lavishing both gifts and love upon the younger daughter. I choose to never to have anything else to do with the eldest while holding the younger in the highest esteem.
3. As a matter of fact, I even decided to see the eldest (who has done nothing to me) suffer eternal punishment of the most horrible kind because of this hatred.
4. I tell everyone now that I am really a loving father: both kind and generous.

In his first and third points, he declares the innocence of his children; as a result, he concludes that choosing one of the innocents over the other is “ungodly.” My comment on that post which, not surprisingly, has never appeared:

Your illustration fails at this point:

3. *As a matter of fact, I even decided to see the eldest (who has done nothing to me) suffer eternal punishment...*

The truth is that all men have NOT "done nothing." We have freely and willfully turned our backs on God, rejected Him, and hated Him.

We should be amazed that He has offered mercy and grace to any of His enemies, when He was in no way obligated to do so.

Michael S. Horton (in his article titled *Pelagianism: The Religion of Natural Man*) points out that “Pelagianism was condemned by more church councils than any other heresy in history.”¹⁸

Semi-Pelagianism

In an attempt at maintaining the natural ability of man to choose, while at the same time denying his innocence, Semi-Pelagianism insists that spiritual deadness does not incapacitate.

In presenting the mostly-dead view, Theopedia shows Semi-Pelagianism “aimed at a compromise between Pelagianism and Augustinianism.”¹⁹ The article notes, with regard to man, that his “nature is neither good nor bad, but injured.” Man therefore is in need of God’s grace, but retains the ability “to decide whether he wants God’s grace.”

¹⁸ Michael S. Horton. <<http://bit.ly/a2PaBr>> (accessed 3 October 2010).

¹⁹ Theopedia. <<http://bit.ly/d1AMgd>> (accessed 3 October 2010).

Got Question Ministries (in an article titled *What are Pelagianism and Semi-Pelagianism?*) notes:

Semi-Pelagianism essentially teaches that humanity is tainted by sin, but not to the extent that we cannot cooperate with God's grace on our own. Semi-Pelagianism is, in essence, partial depravity as opposed to total depravity.²⁰

Schaff observes that Semi-Pelagianism, while attempting to reconcile the above views,

Rejects the Pelagian doctrine of the moral roundness of man, but rejects also the Augustinian doctrine of the entire corruption and bondage of the natural man, and substitutes the idea of a diseased or crippled state of the voluntary power.²¹

In introducing his readers to John Cassian, whom Schaff describes as the “head of the Semi-Pelagian party,” Schaff notes that Cassian taught:

That the divine image and human freedom were not annihilated, but only weakened, by the fall; in other words, that man is sick, but not dead, that he cannot indeed help himself, but that he can desire the help of a physician, and either accept or refuse it when offered, and that he must cooperate with the grace of God in his salvation.²²

Shelton Smith, President of Sword Of The Lord Publishers²³ and Editor of their newspaper, in an article titled *The Case Against Calvinism*²⁴, affirms the Semi-Pelagian view when he writes:

Calvin's total-depravity teaching did not properly represent the condition of unsaved men. When the Bible describes the sinful condition of man, there is no question that he is depraved and totally so. Man is not inherently good; he is by nature a sinner.

But man's total depravity must not be defined as total inability. The fact is that God has made arrangements for our salvation, and He is “not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.” (II Pet. 3:9).

So a man is totally depraved (a sinner), but he can come to Christ if he will do so. He has the ability to come to Christ – he can if he will.

Schaff, in summarizing the 3 views, uses the terms Monergism and Synergism to define each.

²⁰ Got Questions Ministries. <<http://bit.ly/9tU9xM>> (accessed 3 October 2010).

²¹ Schaff, 858.

²² Ibid, 861.

²³ *Sword Of The Lord Publishers*. <<http://bit.ly/c8xTV1>> (accessed 3 October, 2010).

²⁴ *Sword Of The Lord*. 27 September 2010.

The Greek church adhered to her undeveloped *synergism*, which coordinates the human will and divine grace as factors in the work of conversion; the Latin church, under the influence of Augustine, advanced to the system of a *divine monergism*, which gives God all the glory, and makes freedom itself a result of grace; while Pelagianism, on the contrary, represented the principle of a *human monergism*, which ascribes the chief merit of conversion to man, and reduces grace to a mere external auxiliary.²⁵

The View of Scripture

My pastor is quite fond of saying, "What does the text say?" After all, one's theology must be defined by Scripture, and not Scripture defined by one's theology. In Genesis 3:8, we learn that after their sin our first parents "hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden." We might well refer to this event as the first game of hide and seek; notice that it was the man who hid and God sought. In Romans, the Apostle Paul establishes that all mankind follow doggedly in their footsteps.

Romans 3:9-18

⁹ What then? Are we better than they? Not at all. For we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin. ¹⁰ As it is written: "There is none righteous, no, not one; ¹¹ There is none who understands; There is none who seeks after God. ¹² They have all turned aside; They have together become unprofitable; There is none who does good, no, not one." ¹³ "Their throat is an open tomb; With their tongues they have practiced deceit"; "The poison of asps is under their lips"; ¹⁴ "Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness." ¹⁵ "Their feet are swift to shed blood; ¹⁶ Destruction and misery are in their ways; ¹⁷ And the way of peace they have not known." ¹⁸ "There is no fear of God before their eyes."

This passage presents man in his natural state, completely without the ability or even desire to seek God. Paul goes on to show how the person described above becomes reconciled to God.

Romans 5:6-8

⁶ For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. ⁸ But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Old Ship of Zion

In the synergistic view, the old ship of Zion is sailing along with enough life preservers for all who are floundering in the ocean. God offers to throw a life preserver to each swimmer, but

²⁵ Schaff, 786.

only if they are willing to grab it. They must, with their last ounce of strength, reach for the life preserver so that they may be pulled into the ship. God may not jump into the ocean, as that would violate the sovereignty of the swimmer. In the monergistic view, the ocean is full of rotting corpses, and God does in fact jump into the water, breathe life into the corpse, and give the individual not only the desire but also the strength to climb into the ship.

My brother, commenting on the previous illustration, wrote the following in a recent email:

When I think of what God has to do in regeneration the picture in mind is the one from the movie "Titanic" where the one rescue boat that came back to check for survivors found all the frozen, floating bodies, and no matter how hard he blew his whistle, none of the bodies came to life (only the one person who was still alive responded). Synergism assumes that dead corpses can be moved by appeal. If we shout loud enough or long enough or use the right degree of urgency the dead will come to life of their own free will. But we know that you can only nudge a dead body – if you push it hard enough, it will certainly move, but it cannot come to life and move by itself apart from a miracle of grace. (Eph. 2:1)

Synergism, in whatever form it takes, has man capable of participating with God in his salvation. *Strange Baptist Fire* (in a post titled *Your Election Ballot*) shows a tract from some years ago. The tract is in the form of a ballot, with God, Satan, and man each casting a vote on the issue of man's salvation. They write:

Thus salvation is ultimately decided by a work of our own. Also note that God's vote carries no more weight than does Satan's nor man's. This approach, popular among Protestants of many denominations, including ours, is a misrepresentation of God's revealed truth in His word. It elevates fallen, darkened, stone-hearted man, and essentially takes God off of His throne, giving Him no greater sovereignty than the rest of us. We may as well then say with atheist William Henley, "I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul."²⁶

The Monergistic view of salvation most accurately reflects the Scripture. Sadly, as the previous quote shows, most evangelism today presupposes the synergistic view.

My Lord I Did Not Choose You

A. Sullivan / Josiah Conder © Public Domain

My Lord I did not choose You
For that could never be
My heart would still refuse You
Had You not chosen me

²⁶ Strange Baptist Fire. <<http://bit.ly/9QVDdP>> (accessed 3 October 2010)

You took the sin that stained me
You cleansed me made me new
Of old You have ordained me
That I should live in You

Unless Your grace had called me
And taught my opening mind
The world would have enthralled me
To heavenly glories blind

My heart knows none above You
For Your rich grace I thirst
I know that if I love You
You must have loved me first

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