

THE "ROMANIZATION" OF PROSPER OF AQUITAINE'S DOCTRINE OF GRACE

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INTRODUCTION

This paper will attempt to give a partial explanation of why a fifth-century layman named Prosper of Aquitaine toned down his strict Augustinian view of grace as he grew older. In his correspondence and treatises between 428 and 432, predestination seemed central to his soteriology. In these writings, Prosper taught that there is an absolute decree, that depends upon God's will alone, which makes one person a vessel of honor and another of dishonor.¹ Predestination, he said, must be preached and must be believed upon in the Church.² "No Christian who is a Catholic denies God's predestination," Prosper wrote.³ So central was predestination to his view of salvation, that, for Prosper, those who raised objections against predestinarianism, by doing so, were jeopardizing their very salvation.⁴

After 435, however, there is a noticeable difference in the role that predestination plays in his treatment of human salvation. Between 435 and the 450's Prosper wrote at least six treatises, two of them explicitly about soteriology

and the dynamics of grace. Remarkably, discourse on predestination is entirely absent in these writings.

Virtually all scholars of Prosper agree that a change is evident in Prosper's literary corpus. A few hold that Prosper abandoned predestination altogether,⁵ but most describe Prosper's change as simply a toning down of the more troublesome of Augustine's doctrines like predestination.⁶

But what accounts for such a change? What occurred in Prosper's life that might explain the de-emphasis on predestination in his later writings on grace? Unlike Augustine, Prosper never wrote about a change of mind on the subject, which might provide us with a starting point for an exploration of the reason behind his shift.⁷ Instead we are left to speculate as we fit the pieces of Prosper's life and writings together.

Almost all scholars agree that the change had something to do with Roman influence. Prosper did, in fact, relocate from southern Gaul to Rome around 435. There he spent the remaining twenty or thirty years of his life as a literary advisor in the papal court. Also in 435, one of Prosper's main doctrinal opponents, John Cassian, died. With Cassian off the scene, and a new start in a new city, Prosper had opportunity to reflect on the doctrine of grace outside of a polemical context.⁸ Prosper's last writing on grace, The Call of All Nations, in which God's desire to save all humans is central, seems to have been a product of such reflection.⁹

Several scholars have cited Prosper's relationship with Pope Leo as a factor in the development of his soteriology. It is well documented that in Rome,

Prosper enjoyed a long friendship and working relationship with Leo. It has also been established that Prosper had a hand in both the production and editing of many of Leo's letters and sermons.¹⁰ Leo's respectful relationship with John Cassian is often cited as a factor.¹¹ In addition, Pope Leo's concern with the spread of the Gospel to the whole world, his inimical relationship with determinists, and overall "optimistic Augustinianism" may have rubbed off on his friend and co-laborer, Prosper.¹² While I believe that Prosper's social relationships in Rome indeed were influential in his later toning down of the harsher elements of Augustinian soteriology, there is evidence to suggest that Prosper's de-emphasis of predestination began a few years before his relocation to the Eternal City.¹³ This literary evidence includes Pope Celestine's Letter 21, Prosper's Against Cassian, and Prosper's Capitula.

This paper will propose that Prosper's shifting of focus away from predestination corresponded to his shift the polemics of the semi-Pelagian controversy toward the issue of "authority." About 432, Prosper initially invoked the authority of Rome for his side. Over the next few years, Prosper increasingly appealed to Roman authority for support, and the more he did this, the less emphasis he placed on predestination.

BACKGROUND TO THE SEMI-PELAGIAN CONTROVERSY

Prosper Tiro was born in Aquitania, a western province of Gaul, around 390. After receiving a solid classical education, Prosper relocated to Marseilles

in southern Gaul where he was closely associated with the monastic communities of Marseilles and Lerins. Prosper, however, never actually joined the monasteries there, nor was he ever ordained to the priesthood, but remained a layperson all of his life.

Although he never met Augustine in person, Prosper had profound respect for the African bishop's doctrine of grace and his anti-Pelagian writings. Not everyone in southern Gaul, however, held Augustine's anti-Pelagian writings, especially his later ones, in such high esteem. Starting about the year 426, some in Gaul were opposing the strong predestinarianism in the bishop's later writings. According to Prosper, these opponents were saying that Augustine completely "sets aside free will and under cover of grace upholds fatalism."¹⁴

Distressed by this opposition to his master's teaching, around 428, Prosper wrote to Augustine, informing him of the situation in Gaul. Prosper told him that some were teaching "remnants of the Pelagian heresy" (from which comes the term "semi-Pelagianism"), teaching that the beginning of salvation comes from free will, which is then helped by grace.¹⁵ Prosper requested that Augustine write a fuller explanation of predestination so that these opponents might "come to embrace the true doctrine of grace in all its purity."¹⁶

In 429, Augustine responded with On the Predestination of the Saints and On the Gift of Perseverance addressed to Prosper and his friend, Hilary. But these treatises did not have the effect on the monks that Prosper had hoped. The so-called "semi-Pelagians," whose leaders included John Cassian and Vincent of Lerins, only found in these two writings of Augustine more things to

oppose. Their arguments, however, were confined to lectures or conferences while Augustine was alive; none of the Gauls had expressed their opposition in writing, even though Prosper had dared them to do so.¹⁷

Immediately after Augustine died in 430, all of this changed. The monastic communities of Gaul began publishing very sharp and exaggerated attacks upon Augustine's doctrine. For example, one document stated that Augustine taught that adultery, rape, incest, and murder all take place in the world according to God's will and predestination.¹⁸ In response, Prosper took up his pen to defend what he believed to be the "genuine" teaching of his deceased master.

In the treatises that Prosper wrote in defense of St. Augustine between 430 and 432, he strongly asserted the predestinarian teaching of his master (although the polemics necessitated that he continually distinguish between the Catholic doctrine of "predestined punishment" and the non-Catholic doctrine of "predestination to sin").¹⁹ But the monks of Gaul seemed unreceptive to Prosper's explanations, and Prosper found his views being distorted together with Augustine's. "They compose a tissue of horrible lies;" Prosper complained, "their gossip is slanderous, meant to create bad blood against us."²⁰

POPE CELESTINE'S LETTER 21

In a strategic move in 431 or 432, Prosper made a decision that would shift the semi-Pelagian controversy away from theological disputation about the

difficult elements of Augustine's thought toward the issue of authority.²¹ He and his friend, Hilary, journeyed to Rome, and gained the support of Pope Celestine (422-432). Prosper complained to the pope that many in the monastic communities of southern Gaul were maligning the memory of Augustine, and that their bishops were allowing it. In response, Celestine sent Epistle 21 to the bishops of Gaul, especially to John Cassian's bishop, Venerius of Marseilles. In this letter, Celestine spoke in praise of Augustine. He said that Rome had always held Augustine in communion, and there was never any suspicion concerning him. Augustine, he said, was reckoned among the greatest doctors of the Church, and was loved and honored everywhere.²² The letter did not, however, specifically advocate any particular doctrinal point of Augustine, nor did it condemn any of the semi-Pelagians or their doctrines.

PROSPER'S AGAINST CASSIAN

In 432, John Cassian published his lectures or Conferences that he had been delivering for some years. Prosper immediately responded, circa 433, against Conference 13 with On Grace and Free Will Against Cassian the Lecturer [hereafter Against Cassian]. In this treatise, Prosper once again turned toward Rome for support, and moved the polemics to the issue of authority. "The wicked errors of such men," Prosper wrote, "must be countered less by way of argument than by the weight of authority."²³ Prosper went on to boast that his

explanation of grace had the authority of Popes Innocent (401-417), Zosimus (417-418), Boniface (418-422), and Celestine backing it.²⁴

This shifting of the polemics of the semi-Pelagian controversy to authority, however, resulted in the removal of predestination from playing a central role in Prosper's later writings. For, aligning himself with the papacy substantially limited Prosper's playing cards against the semi-Pelagians to those tenets of soteriology that the bishops of Rome had explicitly sanctioned. By making the claim that his side had the weight of the authority of the Apostolic See, Prosper was, in effect, saying that his doctrine of grace was the same as the doctrine of the papacy. In doing this, Prosper had to narrow the specifics about grace to those points on which both he and the papacy had in common.

Soon enough, Prosper learned that the popes had said very little, if anything at all, on the subject of predestination. By 433, Prosper was already refocusing his discussion with the semi-Pelagians to the absolute necessity of grace for the beginning of a good will, about which the popes had spoken; and Prosper discarded discussion about predestination, about which the popes had said virtually nothing. A clue to this shift is already evident in Chapter 21 of Against Cassian.

This chapter reveals that the semi-Pelagians were rebutting Prosper's claim of authority by saying that no Roman bishop had particularly and distinctly approved Augustine's later writings, which contained the strongest of his predestinarian sentiments.²⁵ Both Prosper and his Gallic opponents were aware that several of the popes had received anti-Pelagian letters and treatises from

Augustine some ten to fifteen years earlier.²⁶ But the Gauls were making a distinction between the doctrine in Augustine's earlier writings, with which they could agree, and the predestinarianism of his later writings, with which they could not.²⁷

Prosper's response was to say that the teaching of Augustine's early anti-Pelagian writings was essentially the same as the teaching in his later anti-Pelagian writings. Therefore, papal approval of the doctrine of Augustine's earlier anti-Pelagian writings meant papal approval of the doctrine in Augustine's later ones.²⁸ In other words, Prosper could only argue that the see of Rome implicitly approved the strong expressions of predestination in Augustine's later writings. Prosper's shift of the semi-Pelagian controversy Romeward, to the issue of authority, resulted in this quandary.

PROSPER'S CAPITULA

Prosper most likely realized that his argument of "implicit papal approval" of the predestinarian teaching in Augustine's later writings, was tenuous; for he abandoned it in his next treatise on grace, the Capitula.²⁹ In this treatise, written about 435 or a little thereafter, he again appealed to Roman authority, but this time used only explicit papal decrees about grace and human salvation.³⁰ Here Prosper arranged official pronouncements of the Apostolic See, including anti-Pelagian canons from African synods that Pope Innocent had approved, and excerpts from Pope Zosimus' Tractoria to all bishops throughout the world.³¹ The

citations do indeed advocate an Augustinian soteriology in which God's grace, help, and mercy is absolutely necessary for the initial movement of human free will toward God. But interestingly, they say nothing about predestination. Prosper, I would submit, could not find any explicit support for predestination in the writings of the popes, and therefore he himself de-emphasized predestination.

Prosper's alignment with the papacy contributed to the eventual victory of "Augustinian" soteriology over semi-Pelagianism in the West. But as his controversy with the Gauls ran its course, it also led him to emphasize only those points of the Augustinian doctrine of grace that the popes had explicitly ruled upon, and to leave implicit those points about which the popes were silent.

Prosper himself said as much in the last chapter of the Capitula:

As to the more profound and more difficult points in the topical problems of our day...we neither mean to scorn them nor need we expound them here. For a profession of faith in the doctrine on the grace of God...we consider amply sufficient what the writings of the Apostolic See, as given above in these articles, have taught us.³²

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have proposed that Prosper's shift of the polemics of the semi-Pelagian controversy to the issue of authority, beginning in the year 432, induced Prosper to eventually remove overt predestinarianism from the place it occupied in his earlier treatises on grace. This is not to say that Prosper personally renounced his belief in God's predestination, or that he committed his

autographed copy of Augustine's On the Predestination of the Saints to the flames. But once Prosper had aligned himself with the authority of the Roman see, he soon came to realize that predestination was not central in the writings of the popes. Consequently, he seems to have made a conscious decision that predestination would not be central in his writings either.

¹ Letter to Augustine, 6 & 8; in P. De Letter, Prosper of Aquitaine: Defense of St. Augustine, ACW 32 (Ramsey, NJ: Newman Press, 1963), 44, 46.

² Letter to Augustine, 8; Answers to the Extracts of the Genoese, 8-9; in P. De Letter, Prosper of Aquitaine: Defense of St. Augustine, 46,63,68.

³ Answers to the Objections of the Gauls, 1; in De Letter, Prosper of Aquitaine: Defense of the St. Augustine, 140.

⁴ Letter to Rufinus, 11; Letter to Augustine, 1; in De Letter, Prosper of Aquitaine: Defense of St. Augustine, 29-30, 38.

⁵ Philip Barclift, "Predestination and Divine Foreknowledge in the Sermons of Pope Leo the Great," Church History 62:1 (March 1993):5-21 at 10; Stephen J. Duffy, The Dynamics of Grace: Perspectives in Theological Anthropology (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993), 112.

⁶ M. Cappuyns, "Le premier representant de l'Augustinisme medeival, Prosper d'Aquitaine." Recherches de Theologie ancienne et medievale 1 (1929):309-27 at 310; De Letter, St. Prosper of Aquitaine: Call of All Nations ACW 14 (Ramsey, NJ: Newman Press, 1952), Introduction, 10-11; Georges Plinval, "Prosper d'Aquitaine interprete de saint Augustin," Recherches Augustiniennes 1 (1958):339-55 at 353; John E. Chisholm, The Pseudo-Augustinian Hypomnesticon Against the Pelagians and Celestians, 2 vols (Fribourg: University Press, 1967), 1:36; R.A. Markus, "Chronicle and Theology: Prosper of Aquitaine," in Christopher Holdsworth and T.P. Wiseman, eds. The Inheritance of

Historiography 350-900. Exeter Studies in History 12 (University of Exeter, 1986), 31-43 at 37; Steven Muhlberger, The Fifth-Century Chroniclers: Prosper, Hydatius, and the Gallic Chronicler of 452. Classical and Medieval Texts, Papers, and Monographs 27 (Leeds, England: Francis Cairns, 1990), 52-3; Rebecca Harden Weaver, Divine Grace and Human Agency: A Study of the Semi-Pelagian Controversy Patristic Monograph Series 15 (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1996), 141; Michael G.L. Church, "The Law of Begging: Prosper at the End of the Day," Worship 73:5 (Sept 1999):442-53 at 444.

⁷ Augustine documented his own change of mind on the subject of predestination in Retractiones 22.2 and On the Predestination of the Saints 7. If Prosper had documented a change of mind on predestination, we would still treat it critically, but it would at least be a starting point.

⁸ About the liberating effect Cassian's death had on Prosper, see Barclift, "Predestination and Divine Foreknowledge," 8.

⁹ Call of All Nations is believed to have been written about 450. The "heat of immoderate disputes" to which Prosper refers in Book 2:1, seems to be a thing of the past; De Letter, St. Prosper of Aquitaine: Call of All Nations, 89.

¹⁰ N.W. James, "Leo the Great and Prosper of Aquitaine: A Fifth-Century Pope and His Advisor." Journal of Theological Studies 44:2 (October 1993):554-84.

¹¹ Church, "The Law of Begging," 446; Weaver, Divine Grace and Human Agency, 138; Markus, "Chronicle and Theology," 37. Leo, when he was a deacon in Rome, asked John Cassian to help the Roman church understand the Nestorian controversy. Cassian responded with On the Incarnation Against Nestorius addressed to his "honored friend" Leo; PL 50:10. Later, when Leo and Prosper composed the famous Tome, they made use of a dossier of texts of Hilary of Poitiers compiled by Cassian. See J. Gaidioz, "Prosper d'Aquitaine et le tome a Flavien." Recherches de science religieuse 23 (1949): 271-301 and J. Doignon, "Une compilation de textes d'Hilaire de Poitiers presentee par le pape Celestin 1 a un concile romain en 430." Oikoumene: Studi paleocristiani pubblicati in onore del concilio ecumenico vatican II (Universita di Catania: Centro di studi sull'antico

christianesimo, 1964), 477-97 at 491.

¹² Philip A. McShane, "Leo the Great, Guardian of Doctrine and Discipline." Eglise et Theologie 14 (1983):9-24; A.K. Squire, "Universal Compassion in Leo the Great." Studia Patristica 13 (1975):280-5; T.M. Charles-Edwards, "Palladius, Prosper, and Leo the Great: Mission and Primatial Authority." Saint Patrick, A.D. 493-1993 (Rochester, NY: Boydell, 1993), 1-12 at 5-7; A. Lauras, "Saint Leon le Grand et le Manicheisme Romain." Studia Patristica 11 (1972):203-9; Harry O Maier, "Manichee!: Leo the Great and the Orthodox Panopticon." Journal of Early Christian Studies 4:4(1996):441-60; P. Herve de l'Incarnation, "Le grace dean l'oeuvre de S. Leon le Grand." Recherches de theologie ancienne et medievale 22(1995):17-55,193-212. On page 212 l'Incarnation describes Leo's spirituality as "un augustinisme optimiste."

¹³ Largely unexplored is the possible influence on Prosper of Vincent of Lerins' Commonitorium, Pope Sixtus, Arnobius the Younger, and the anonymous author of the Praedestinatus. Arnobius lived in or near Rome during the time of Prosper's residence there, and wrote a Psalms commentary in which he makes several anti-predestinarian remarks. It is edited in CCSL 25. Praedestinatus, in PL 53:579-672 is an anonymous heresiology written in Rome around this time that paints a horrible picture of Christian predestinarians and describes predestination as the culmination of all heresies. It has been attributed to Julian of Ecclanum and Arnobius the Younger.

¹⁴ Letter to Rufinus 3; De Letter, Prosper of Aquitaine: Defense of St. Augustine, 23.

¹⁵ Letter to Augustine 6-7; De Letter, Prosper of Aquitaine: Defense of St. Augustine, 44-45.

¹⁶ Letter to Augustine 7-9; De Letter, Prosper of Aquitaine: Defense of St. Augustine, 46-47.

¹⁷ Letter to Rufinus 3; De Letter, Prosper of Aquitaine: Defense of St. Augustine, 23.

¹⁸ Vincentian Articles 10 & 11; De Letter, Prosper of Aquitaine: Defense of St. Augustine, 170-1.

¹⁹ These include the Carmen de Ingratis, the Hypomnesticon Against the Pelagians and Celestians especially Book VI on Predestination, Answers to the Objections of the Gauls, and Answers to the Vincentian Articles.

²⁰ Answers to the Vincentian Articles, Intro; De Letter, Prosper of Aquitaine: Defense of St. Augustine, 163.

²¹ Prosper did not make an appeal to the African bishops, probably because the Vandals had by this time conquered North Africa and put a halt to the regular synods of the Catholic bishops there. It is interesting to speculate how the outcome of the semi-Pelagian controversy would have differed had Prosper appealed to the Africans, they met in synod, made a ruling on predestination and the more difficult related elements of Augustine's thought, and sent the canons to Rome for confirmation.

²² PL 45:1755-1760 and PL 50:528-537;

²³ On Grace and Free Will Against Cassian the Lecturer [hereafter Against Cassian] 21.4; De Letter, Prosper of Aquitaine: Defense of St. Augustine, 136.

²⁴ Against Cassian 21; De Letter, Prosper of Aquitaine: Defense of St. Augustine, 133-8.

²⁵ Against Cassian 21.3; De Letter, Prosper of Aquitaine: Defense of St. Augustine, 135-6.

²⁶ For example, Augustine's Letters 175-177 from African synods and bishops to Pope Innocent, Against Two Letters of the Pelagians to Pope Boniface, and Letters 191 and 194 to Sixtus before he became pope.

²⁷ The Gauls also made a distinction between a person, private opinion of a particular bishop (in this case, Augustine's strong predestinarianism) and the common, general opinion of the Church (which they held was not predestinarian). See Vincent of Lerins, Commonitories 28; FC 7, p. 322.

²⁸ Against Cassian 21.3; De Letter, Prosper of Aquitaine: Defense of St. Augustine, 136.

²⁹ Some of the Latin titles of the treatise are Praeteritorum episcoporum sedis apostolicae auctoritates de gratia Dei (et libero voluntatis arbitrio) and De gratia Dei indiculus. Hence, it is referred to by various names including Praeteritorum or Auctoritates or Indiculus or Capitula. In English it is sometimes called the Syllabus. De Letter in Prosper of

Aquitaine: Defense of St. Augustine calls it Official Pronouncements of the Apostolic See on Divine Grace and Free Will, 178-85.

³⁰ Scholarship traditionally dates the Capitula between 435 and 442. The treatise is alluded to in Pope Leo's letter 1 to the bishop of Aquileia, written in 442, establishing the terminus ad quem. See St. Leo the Great: Letters FC 34 (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1957), 20. The suggestion that the Capitula was written in 439 when Julian of Ecclanum sought reinstatement to his bishop, but was prevented from doing so by archdeacon Leo, is bound with outdated scholarship that attributed the Capitula to Leo. Since it has been restored to Prosper, the 439 date carries less weight. If it can be established that Prosper wrote the Capitula in engagement with Vincent of Lerins' Commonitorium, it was probably written closer to 435. The Commonitorium was written in 434, and Prosper was in the habit of responding immediately to the treatises of the semi-Pelagians.

³¹ Capitula 1-6; De Letter, Prosper of Aquitaine: Defense of St. Augustine, 179-82.

³² Capitula 10; De Letter, Prosper of Aquitaine: Defense of St. Augustine, 185.