

Introduction to Christian Theology

Sample Lesson





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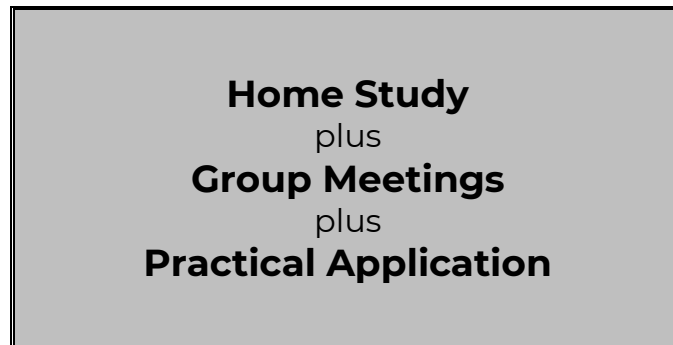
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Introduction

Our Open Learning courses are designed to help you learn by means of:



Home Study

This course is made up of **ten Blocks** and each Block has **four lessons**. If you have about 1 ½ hr to spare (very roughly), you can complete one lesson. These lessons require you to read and interact with the course material as well as with your Bible.

Each lesson is **programmed** to help you check your progress as you work through. To get the maximum benefit it is important that you use the course in the way it was intended:

1. Read section 1 (often referred to by the technical term 'frame' 1).
2. Make the response required, if there is one.
3. Check that your answer corresponds with the feedback given in the 'feedback' section at the end. (Wherever feedback is given, it is marked with a raven).
4. Proceed to section 2.



Note that the **course** is programmed—**you** are **not** being programmed! The aim of programming is that:

1. you can check frequently that you have understood the material presented;
2. you are stimulated to active and critical thinking;
3. you reinforce what you learn and are better able to remember it.

Sometimes, discussion frames are given. These are clearly indicated by a heading 'For Discussion' and box. Here you should answer the question in your

own words and come to the group meeting prepared to discuss the question as indicated.

At the end of each lesson, we encourage you to spend some time in reflection on how what you have learnt applies to you in the situation where God has placed you.

Group Meeting

Regular group meetings take place (normally fortnightly) where you will have the opportunity to discuss points of interest that have arisen and think through with others how your learning may be applied. At the end of each block of home study, you will also normally be given a five-minute quiz.

The group meetings give the opportunity for you to clarify ideas and to share your own thoughts and to listen to the ideas of others. The process of learning from the Bible in a group is an essential part of the programme. It is here that you are able to think through areas of application and to pray and support each other in your studies.

Practical Application

Built into our courses are questions that encourage you to apply the message of the Bible to daily life. You are also encouraged to think through how your studies relate to your own discipleship and the mission and ministry of the local church.

Block 8 Lesson 1

Human Nature, Sin and Grace



Preparing for this lesson:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Take a moment to pray that God will help you as you begin to think about Human nature, sin and grace.• It will be helpful to keep a notebook handy to note down any questions or issues for discussion.
Objectives	<p>At the end of this lesson you will be able to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. explain briefly three different understandings of humanity's creation in the image of God;2. explain briefly three ways in which the Greek Patristic tradition understood the idea of 'original sin';3. evaluate these in the light of biblical teaching;4. sum up the different understandings of free will, sin, grace and justification put forward by Pelagius and Augustine;5. explain briefly why you would support Pelagius or Augustine, listing the biblical references which you see as supporting your choice.

1. The foundations for subsequent Christian discussions of human fallenness and God's grace were laid in the Patristic period. The most important discussion of this topic in this period was that between Pelagius and Augustine at the beginning of the fifth century and we will look at what they had to say shortly.

However, they were not the first Christian thinkers to consider these subjects. There had been considerable discussion of them in the previous centuries, a discussion which is summarized by Alister McGrath on pp. 440-443 of *Christian theology*. Please read his summary and the move on to frame 2.

2. The foundation for any Christian understanding of the fallenness of humanity is the belief that human beings were created with a special status in the eyes of God, i.e. created 'in the image of God'.

Can you recall the biblical passage that teaches this?



3. Because for many centuries Latin was the main theological language in the western Church, as McGrath notes a Latin phrase is often used to express the idea that humanity is created in the image and likeness of God.

Without looking it up in McGrath see if you can write this phrase down.



4. As we have seen, although the Christian tradition has tended to focus on the idea of human beings being created in the 'image' of God the book of Genesis itself uses two terms to express this idea - *image* and *likeness*.

As McGrath observes, the early Christian writers Tertullian and Origen noted the fact that Genesis uses these two terms to describe the way human beings were created by God and argued that there was a distinction between them. Although Tertullian and Origen interpreted this distinction differently, there was a similarity between their approaches. Can you complete this sentence?

Both Tertullian and Origen taught that:



5. Augustine's approach to the 'image of God'

The first approach to the understanding of the image of God is thus that being in the image of God is only half of what God intended for humanity. Humanity is also intended to be 'like' God - an intention which is fulfilled through God's saving activity. A different approach was taken by Augustine. Can you summarize what he had to say about humanity's creation in the image of God?




6. McGrath notes that for Augustine what is distinctive about our capacity for rational thought is that enables us to do something very important. Which of the following statements correctly reflects Augustine's understanding.

- a. Our rationality enables us to relate rightly to God.
- b. Our rationality enables us to understand the nature of the physical universe.
- c. Our rationality enables us to create exciting new technologies.



7. According to Augustine the chief reason we are given reason is so that we can use it to rightly relate to God. That is why Augustine follows Paul in Col 3:10 and sees the restoration of the image of God by grace after the Fall as consisting in a renewal 'in the knowledge of God'.

One of the fascinating things about looking at the Christian doctrine of human nature is the range of practical issues which it brings up. Augustine's view of the role of human reason has huge implications for our understanding of education? Can you see why?




8. Lactantius and the 'image of God'

A third approach to understanding the image is that it gives a fundamental importance and dignity to all human beings. As McGrath explains, this idea was developed by the fourth century writer Lactantius in his *Divine Institutes*. Look again at the extract from this work given by McGrath on p. 442 and then see if you can explain in a sentence why Lactantius thinks we are 'forbidden to develop or to encourage hatred' of other human beings.



9. Can you think of any contemporary situations where this approach by Lactantius has relevance? Note your answer down below and please be prepared to share it with your group meeting.



10. Assessing the three approaches

The writers of the early Church thus present us with a range of understandings concerning what it means for human beings to be created in the image of God. Each of the three approaches has something important to teach us.

It is indeed true that through the saving activity of God we are made like him and that this likeness will become complete at the end of time. We can see this, for example, from 2 Cor 3:18:

And we all, with unveiled faces, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

and from 1 Jn 3:2

Beloved, we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.

It is indeed true, as we have seen, that we have been granted the use of reason by God and that the right use of reason is to come to know him better.

It is indeed true that all human beings have worth and dignity because they are created in the image of God. Thus David Atkinson comments on the prohibition of murder in Gen 9:6,

Innocent human beings, Genesis teaches, should not be deliberately killed. And why? *For God made man in his own image.*

The Message of Genesis, IVP, 1990, p. 40.

However, although they have important things to tell us, modern Old Testament scholarship would feel that the first two approaches we have looked at have not really understood properly the teaching about the image of God contained in Genesis 1. Can you think why this is the case? Jot your thoughts down below and be prepared to talk about them in your group meeting.



11. Modern Old Testament scholarship

Contemporary Old Testament scholars would disagree with the distinction between image and likeness advocated by Tertullian and Origen because it overlooks the fact that the use of the two words in Gen 1:26 is an example of something that occurs frequently in Hebrew, and is known as 'synonymous parallelism'. If you think you understand the meaning of this phrase jot it down below. Otherwise skip straight to the feedback.



12. Many contemporary Old Testament scholars would also disagree with the notion that the image of God in humanity consists in inherent human characteristics or qualities such as the capacity for rational thought. Instead they would say that it is to be found in the relationship between humanity and God which God initiates at creation. To quote David Atkinson again:

They would argue that the image is not a question of a quality in people, but of the fact that God has created people as his counterpart and that human beings can have a history with God. Westermann argues that 'human beings are created in such a way that their very

existence is intended to be their relationship with God.' The image, on this view, is not about something we have, or something we can do: it is about a relationship.

First and foremost it is about the particular relationship in which God places himself with human beings, a relationship in which we become God's counterpart, his representative and his glory on the earth.

The Message of Genesis, IVP, 1990, p. 40.

At the end of this quotation Atkinson identifies three forms of the relationship with God in which we exist as those who are his image. We are called to be his *counterpart*, his *representative*, and his *glory*. What do these three terms mean to you? Note down your suggestions below.

Counterpart: _____

Representative: _____

Glory: _____



13. Adam and Eve and the fall

In whatever way it has been understood, humanity's creation in the image of God has been seen as a blessing from God, a blessing that was most fully experienced by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden before the Fall.

As McGrath explains on p.442 the state of blessedness enjoyed by Adam and Eve was understood in slightly different ways by Athanasius and the Cappadocian Fathers. See if you can complete these two sentences.

Athanasius taught that _____

The Cappadocians taught that _____



14. Read through Gn 2-3 and then write down below what you agree with and disagree with in what Athanasius and the Cappadocians say.

Agree: _____

Disagree: _____

Have you any further thoughts to add to this?



- 15.** As even a casual reading of Gen 3 makes clear, this state of blessedness did not last. The Greek Patristic writers were well of this fact and taught that the Fall of Adam had serious consequences for the rest of humanity. As McGrath explains, the Greek Patristic tradition diverged in three ways from the understanding of the consequences of the Fall which was to be developed by Augustine.

Unlike Augustine it held that humanity possesses free will and that sin is caused by its misuse.

Unlike Augustine writers such as Gregory Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa taught that children are born without sin.

Unlike Augustine the Greek tradition did not hold that Adam's guilt for his transgression in Eden has been passed on to us.

However, as McGrath also points out on p. 443 there are three ways in which the idea of 'original sin' (sin resulting from the Fall of Adam) is important to Greek Patristic thought. Without looking at McGrath's list see if you can remember what these were.



- 16.** As we shall see, these three ideas were to be developed by Augustine and became the basis for orthodox Christian thinking about the consequences of the Fall. It is therefore very important to see whether they have a biblical basis. See if you can write down where you think these ideas can be found in the Bible. Be prepared to discuss the matter in your group meeting.
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- 17.** My answer to the last question is that these ideas can be found explicitly in St Paul's teaching in Rom 5:12-21. However, I would also argue that they are supported by the whole of the Bible since in the biblical story as a whole all the sins and weaknesses which humanity displays can be traced back to the story of the Fall recorded in Genesis 3, a story which is clearly intended as an explanation of the subsequent human situation. In the words of the Old Testament scholar B.S. Childs:

Both in form and function chapter 3 is at pains to stress the full anthropological and cosmological effects of the disobedience. The aetiological form of the curses makes it clear that the events were not simply regarded as entertaining stories from the past, but rather offered a theological interpretation of man's miserable condition both in the world and before God.

Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments, SCM, 1992, p. 569.

In other words, if you want to know what is wrong with humanity then Gn 3 is meant to provide you with the answer, and all of the rest of the biblical story has to be seen in this light.

 *Go on to the next frame.*

18. The controversy between Augustine and Pelagius

Although issues concerning human nature and the effect of the Fall upon it were discussed by the early Greek Fathers of the Church nevertheless, they were first explored in detail in the controversy between Pelagius and Augustine at the start of the fifth century. McGrath covers this controversy in some detail on pp. 443-449. Read through this and then...

 *Go on to the next frame.*

- 19.** As McGrath notes on p. 443, the issues debated by Pelagius and Augustine can be conveniently summarized under four headings. See if you can complete McGrath's four headings below. Repeat this exercise until you can do it from memory.


The understanding of _____

The understanding of _____


The understanding of _____

The understanding of _____ 


- 20.** The first issue at stake between Augustine and Pelagius was thus the issue of the **freedom of the will**. Looking at what McGrath has to say on pp. 443-445, please see if you can summarize the difference between Pelagius and Augustine on this issue in a sentence below.

_____ 


- 21. The nature of sin.** Read what McGrath says on pp. 428-30 and then summarize the different understandings of the nature of sin of Pelagius and Augustine.

_____ 

- 22. The nature of grace.** Look at what McGrath has to say about this on pp. 446-448 and then summarize briefly the different views of Pelagius and Augustine.


_____ 

- 23. *The nature of justification.*** McGrath calls this 'The Basis of Salvation'. Again, read what he has to say and then summarize the contrasting approaches of Pelagius and Augustine in a sentence below.




24. What do you think?

Now that you have worked through the difference between the approaches of Pelagius and Augustine it is time for you to make a choice between them. The Western Church has traditionally sided with Augustine, but could it have been wrong? What do you think? Please write down in not more than fifty words below whether you prefer the approach of Augustine or Pelagius and why. Please also be prepared to discuss and defend your choice in your group meeting.



- 25.** Having made your choice between Augustine and Pelagius make a note of the biblical texts you would put forward to support your choice. List them below and be prepared to explain your choice in your group meeting.



Reflecting on this lesson

Note down in your notebook anything from today's lesson:



- that you want to discuss in your group meeting;
- that is significant for your own personal faith;
- that is significant for explaining the Christian Gospel to others.

Spend some time in prayer asking God to help you apply what you have learnt.



8.1.2	Gn 1:26-27
8.1.3	imago Dei (which simply means in the image of God)
8.1.4	the image of God is something that is possessed by fallen humanity whereas the likeness of God is something that is given subsequently, either at baptism or at the end of time.
8.1.5	The image of God is to be found in our capacity for rational thought (or similar words).
8.1.6	a.
8.1.7	My answer: It has huge implications for our understanding of education because it indicates that it is not enough to teach people simply to understand this world and how to control and use it for our benefit. To teach people to use their reason properly we have to teach them to use it to know God. As the book of Prov 9:10 puts it: The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.
8.1.8	because as a result of our descent from Adam we are all brothers and sisters who possess the image of God in common (or similar).
8.1.9	My answer. It is extremely relevant to situations today where people are the victims of racism and economic and social deprivation. If we all have equal dignity and importance because we are all created in God's image then discrimination, oppression or exploitation of any human being is obviously indefensible.
8.1.10	Your ideas. Read on.
8.1.11	It means the use of two Hebrew words or phrases as parallel ways of describing the same reality (a familiar technique in Hebrew literature) . In the words of Alan Richardson in his commentary on Gen 1:26:we have here a straightforward case of Hebrew parallelism, in which a second phrase repeats the meaning of a phrase that has gone before. The words mean: 'in God's image, that is to say, in his likeness'... (Genesis I-XI, SCM, 1953 p.54)
8.1.12	I think the meaning of these terms has been helpfully summarized by Jürgen Moltmann in his book God in Creation as follows: 'As God's image and appearance on earth, human beings are involved in three fundamental relationships: they rule over other earthly creatures as God's representatives and in his name; they are God's counterpart on earth, the counterpart to whom he wants to talk, and who is intended to respond to him; and they are the appearance of God's splendour and his glory on earth' (SCM, 1985, p. 221).
8.1.13	Adam and Eve enjoyed a perfect relationship with God provided they remained undistracted by the material world : in Eden Adam was free from all human weaknesses and disabilities including death (or similar)
8.1.14	My response: Agree: in Eden Adam and Eve were in a perfect relationship with God (symbolized by their unashamed nakedness in Gn 2:25) and were free from weaknesses disabilities and death (these only come in with the Divine judgement in Gn 3:14-24). : Disagree: the condition for staying in Eden was not to do with being distracted but with being obedient. : I would want to add that in Eden there was also a perfect place to live (Gn 2:8-9), God-given dominion over the created order (vv. 19-20) satisfying human companionship (vv. 20-24) and a God-given vocation (vv. 15-16).
8.1.15	All humanity is involved in Adam's disobedience. : Human moral weaknesses are the result of Adam's fall. : Adam's sin is transmitted to his descendants. Or similar words.

**Feedback:****block 8 lesson 1**

8.1.16	Your answer. Read on.
8.1.19	the 'freedom of the will' : sin : grace : the grounds of justification
8.1.20	Pelagius: we have complete freedom to choose either good or evil; Augustine: we are naturally biased towards choosing evil. Or similar words.
8.1.21	Pelagius: we freely choose sin; Augustine: sin is a state in which we exist and from which we are powerless to escape. Or similar.
8.1.22	Pelagius: grace means that God has given humans the ability and the information needed to choose; Augustine: grace is God's activity within human beings healing, forgiving and restoring them. Or similar words.
8.1.23	Pelagius: God justifies us on the basis of the good works we have performed; Augustine: we are saved simply by the free grace of God received by faith on the basis of his promise.
8.1.24	Your answer. In my view Augustine's approach is preferable to that of Pelagius because Pelagius does not take seriously enough the power sin has over humanity and our inability to free ourselves from it; nor what the New Testament says about justification by faith and the transforming work of God within us. [You might be interested to note that Pelagianism has been called the 'English heresy' and certainly it naturally appeals to many people I have met. Ed.]
8.1.25	Your answers. Augustinians might have chosen Rom 7:1 - 8:11; 9:16; Phil 2:12f.; Lk 15:1-32. Pelagians? How about Mt 19:16 and Dt 30:10-14? [You might like to search the internet, e.g. www.sullivan-county.com has an article 'Why Pelagius was right'. Ed.]

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