

The Creed

CANON 1. If anyone denies that it is the whole man, that is, both body and soul, that was “changed for the worse” through the offense of Adam’s sin, but believes that the freedom of the soul remains unimpaired and that only the body is subject to corruption, he is deceived by the error of Pelagius and contradicts the scripture which says, “The soul that sins shall die” (Ezek. 18:20); and, “Do you not know that if you yield yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are the slaves of the one whom you obey?” (Rom. 6:16); and, “For whatever overcomes a man, to that he is enslaved” (2 Pet. 2:19).

CANON 2. If anyone asserts that Adam’s sin affected him alone and not his descendants also, or at least if he declares that it is only the death of the body which is the punishment for sin, and not also that sin, which is the death of the soul, passed through one man to the whole human race, he does injustice to God and contradicts the Apostle, who says, “Therefore as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned” (Rom. 5:12).

CANON 3. If anyone says that the grace of God can be conferred as a result of human prayer, but that it is not grace itself which makes us pray to God, he contradicts the prophet Isaiah, or the Apostle who says the same thing, “I have been found by those who did not seek me; I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me” (Rom 10:20, quoting Isa. 65:1).

CANON 4. If anyone maintains that God awaits our will to be cleansed from sin, but does not confess that even our will to be cleansed comes to us through the infusion and working of the Holy Spirit, he resists the Holy Spirit himself who says through Solomon, “The will is prepared by the Lord” (Prov. 8:35, LXX), and the salutary word of the Apostle, “For God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:13).

CANON 5. If anyone says that not only the increase of faith but also its beginning and the very desire for faith, by which we believe in Him who justifies the ungodly and comes to the regeneration of holy baptism — if anyone says that this belongs to us by nature and not by a gift of grace, that is, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit amending our will and turning it from unbelief to faith and from godlessness to godliness, it is proof that he is opposed to the teaching of the Apostles, for blessed Paul says, “And I am sure that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:6). And again, “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God” (Eph. 2:8). For those who state that the faith by which we believe in God is natural make all who are separated from the Church of Christ by definition in some measure believers.

CANON 6. If anyone says that God has mercy upon us when, apart from his grace, we believe, will, desire, strive, labor, pray, watch, study, seek, ask, or knock, but does not confess that it is by the infusion and inspiration of the Holy Spirit within us that we have the faith, the will, or the strength to do all these things as we ought; or if anyone makes the assistance of grace depend on the humility or obedience of man and does not agree that it is a gift of grace itself that we are obedient and humble, he contradicts the Apostle who says, “What have you that you did not receive?” (1 Cor. 4:7), and, “But by the grace of God I am what I am” (1 Cor. 15:10).

CANON 7. If anyone affirms that we can form any right opinion or make any right choice which relates to the salvation of eternal life, as is expedient for us, or that we can be saved, that is, assent to the preaching of the gospel through our natural powers without the illumination and inspiration of the Holy Spirit, who makes all men gladly assent to and believe in the truth, he is led astray by a heretical spirit, and does not understand the voice of God who says in the Gospel, “For apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5), and the word of the Apostle, “Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God” (2 Cor. 3:5).

CANON 8. If anyone maintains that some are able to come to the grace of baptism by mercy but others through free will, which has manifestly been corrupted in all those who have been born after the transgression of the first man, it is proof that he has no place in the true faith. For he denies that the free will of all men has been weakened through the sin of the first man, or at least holds that it has been affected in such a way that they have still the ability to seek the mystery of eternal salvation by themselves without the revelation of God. The Lord himself shows how contradictory this is by declaring that no one is able to come to him “unless the Father who sent me draws him” (John 6:44), as he also says to Peter, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 16:17), and as the Apostle says, “No one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:3).

CANON 9. Concerning the succor of God. It is a mark of divine favor when we are of a right purpose and keep our feet from hypocrisy and unrighteousness; for as often as we do good, God is at work in us and with us, in order that we may do so.

CANON 10. Concerning the succor of God. The succor of God is to be ever sought by the regenerate and converted also, so that they may be able to come to a successful end or persevere in good works.

CANON 11. Concerning the duty to pray. None would make any true prayer to the Lord had he not received from him the object of his prayer, as it is written, “Of thy own have we given thee” (1 Chron. 29:14).

CANON 12. Of what sort we are whom God loves. God loves us for what we shall be by his gift, and not by our own deserving.

CANON 13. Concerning the restoration of free will. The freedom of will that was destroyed in the first man can be restored only by the grace of baptism, for what is lost can be returned only by the one who was able to give it. Hence the Truth itself declares: “So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:36).

CANON 14. No mean wretch is freed from his sorrowful state, however great it may be, save the one who is anticipated by the mercy of God, as the Psalmist says, “Let thy compassion come speedily to meet us” (Ps. 79:8), and again, “My God in his steadfast love will meet me” (Ps. 59:10).

CANON 15. Adam was changed, but for the worse, through his own iniquity from what God made him. Through the grace of God the believer is changed, but for the better, from what his iniquity has done for him. The one, therefore, was the change brought about by the first sinner; the other, according to the Psalmist, is the change of the right hand of the Most High (Ps. 77:10).

CANON 16. No man shall be honored by his seeming attainment, as though it were not a gift, or suppose that he has received it because a missive from without stated it in writing or in speech. For the Apostle speaks thus, “For if justification were through the law, then Christ died to no purpose” (Gal. 2:21); and “When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men” (Eph. 4:8, quoting Ps. 68:18). It is from this source that any man has what he does; but whoever denies that he has it from this source either does not truly have it, or else “even what he has will be taken away” (Matt. 25:29).

CANON 17. Concerning Christian courage. The courage of the Gentiles is produced by simple greed, but the courage of Christians by the love of God which “has been poured into our hearts” not by freedom of will from our own side but “through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us” (Rom. 5:5).

CANON 18. That grace is not preceded by merit. Recompense is due to good works if they are performed; but grace, to which we have no claim, precedes them, to enable them to be done.

CANON 19. That a man can be saved only when God shows mercy. Human nature, even though it remained in that sound state in which it was created, could be no means save itself, without the assistance of the Creator; hence since man cannot safeguard his salvation without the grace of God, which is a gift, how will he be able to restore what he has lost without the grace of God?

CANON 20. That a man can do no good without God. God does much that is good in a man that the man does not do; but a man does nothing good for which God is not responsible, so as to let him do it.

CANON 21. Concerning nature and grace. As the Apostle most truly says to those who would be justified by the law and have fallen from grace, “If justification were through the law, then Christ died to no purpose” (Gal. 2:21), so it is most truly declared to those who imagine that grace, which faith in Christ advocates and lays hold of, is nature: “If justification were through nature, then Christ died to no purpose.” Now there was indeed the law, but it did not justify, and there was indeed nature, but it did not justify. Not in vain did Christ therefore die, so that the law might be fulfilled by him who said, “I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them” (Matt. 5:17), and that the nature which had been destroyed by Adam might be restored by him who said that he had come “to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10).

CANON 22. Concerning those things that belong to man. No man has anything of his own but untruth and sin. But if a man has any truth or righteousness, it from that fountain for which we must thirst in this desert, so that we may be refreshed from it as by drops of water and not faint on the way.

CANON 23. Concerning the will of God and of man. Men do their own will and not the will of God when they do what displeases him; but when they follow their own will and comply with the will of God, however willingly they do so, yet it is his will by which what they will is both prepared and instructed.

CANON 24. Concerning the branches of the vine. The branches on the vine do not give life to the vine, but receive life from it; thus the vine is related to its branches in such a way that it supplies them with what they need to live, and does not take this from them. Thus it is to the advantage of the disciples, not Christ, both to have Christ abiding in them and to abide in Christ. For if the vine is cut down another can shoot up from the live root; but one who is cut off from the vine cannot live without the root (John 15:5ff).

CANON 25. Concerning the love with which we love God. It is wholly a gift of God to love God. He who loves, even though he is not loved, allowed himself to be loved. We are loved, even when we displease him, so that we might have means to please him. For the Spirit, whom we love with the Father and the Son, has poured into our hearts the love of the Father and the Son (Rom. 5:5).

CONCLUSION. And thus according to the passages of holy scripture quoted above or the interpretations of the ancient Fathers we must, under the blessing of God, preach and believe as follows. The sin of the first man has so impaired and weakened free will that no one thereafter can either love God as he ought or believe in God or do good for God's sake, unless the grace of divine mercy has preceded him. We therefore believe that the glorious faith which was given to Abel the righteous, and Noah, and Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and to all the saints of old, and which the Apostle Paul commends in extolling them (Heb. 11), was not given through natural goodness as it was before to Adam, but was bestowed by the grace of God. And we know and also believe that even after the coming of our Lord this grace is not to be found in the free will of all who desire to be baptized, but is bestowed by the kindness of Christ, as has already been frequently stated and as the Apostle Paul declares, "For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake" (Phil. 1:29). And again, "He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:6). And again, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and it is not your own doing, it is the gift of God" (Eph. 2:8). And as the Apostle says of himself, "I have obtained mercy to be faithful" (1 Cor. 7:25, cf. 1 Tim. 1:13). He did not say, "because I was faithful," but "to be faithful." And again, "What have you that you did not receive?" (1 Cor. 4:7). And again, "Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights" (Jas. 1:17). And again, "No one can receive anything except what is given him from heaven" (John 3:27). There are innumerable passages of holy scripture which can be quoted to prove the case for grace, but they have been omitted for the sake of brevity, because further examples will not really be of use where few are deemed sufficient.

According to the catholic faith we also believe that after grace has been received through baptism, all baptized persons have the ability and responsibility, if they desire to labor faithfully, to perform with the aid and cooperation of Christ what is of essential importance in regard to the salvation of their soul. We not only do not believe that any are foreordained to evil by the power of God, but even state with utter abhorrence that if there are those who want to believe so evil a thing, they are anathema. We also believe and confess to our benefit that in every good work it is not we who take the initiative and are then assisted through the mercy of God, but God himself first inspires in us both faith in him and love for him without any previous good works of our own that deserve reward, so that we may both faithfully seek the sacrament of baptism, and after baptism be able by his help to do what is pleasing to him. We must therefore most evidently believe that the praiseworthy faith of the thief whom the Lord called to his home in paradise, and of Cornelius the centurion, to whom the angel of the Lord was sent, and of Zacchaeus, who was worthy to receive the Lord himself, was not a natural endowment but a gift of God's kindness.

History and Background of the Creed

I. *Pelagianism*

- A. **The life of Pelagius.** Pelagius was a British monk who rose to prominence in the early 400's. He was credited with being a righteous and holy man, even by his critics. He was not a theologian or overly concerned with theology but thought that the really important thing in the Christian life was morals. He sought to instruct and guide others in how they could live upright lives for Christ.
- B. **The teaching of Pelagius**
 1. **Its roots.** Pelagius' teaching grew out of his views about what was important in the Christian life and his own holy life. As a monk who believed that theology was particularly important and emphasized the importance of holy living, he espoused beliefs that reflected this emphasis.
 2. **The centrality of freedom.** Pelagius' views grew out of the idea of human freedom, specifically, the ability to choose good or evil. Without this freedom, morality has no value in Pelagius' mind. Therefore, humanity must have this freedom in every circumstance, whether one is a Christian or not, in order for God's commandments to be valid. This must also be true of belief in Christ, we must be completely free to choose to obey the call of the gospel.
 3. **Understanding the fall.** This commitment to the idea of freedom determined the way Pelagius viewed the fall. He believed that Adam did not represent humanity in any way in the fall. His sin did not directly affect his descendants, except in that it is a bad example of disobedience to God. Therefore, he did not believe that humanity is fallen in every way. He believed that all are born in the same state that Adam was made at creation, with the same ability to choose to follow God or not. The only disadvantage that humanity has now is that there are so many bad examples of living sinful lives that influence us in that direction. However, this in no way took away from our freedom to choose to live righteous lives in obedience to God.
 4. **The role of grace.** Pelagius believed that God's grace was necessary for us, but he had a very different definition of what grace is. Although he did believe that God, by His grace, enlightens minds and forgives us of sin, he did not believe that grace was something that renews humanity or aids our wills to choose what is right. Rather, grace is the kindness that God shows to those who deserve it because they have chosen to believe in Christ by their free will.
- C. **The controversy over Pelagius' teaching**
 1. **Its beginning.** Unlike most other men who become the center of a heresy, Pelagius did not try to advance his views by disputes with others or by publishing his views for all. Pelagianism erupted into controversy in 411 when one of Pelagius' followers sought to be ordained in North Africa. The followers of Pelagius developed, systematized, and popularized his ideas, taking some beyond what Pelagius himself ever claimed. Pelagius was called to answer for his views and was willing to be conciliatory on some points, but this was not received as genuine.
 2. **Opposition to Pelagianism.** The chief defender of orthodoxy against Pelagianism was Augustine, who was bishop of the North African city of Hippo. Augustine spoke of fallen humanity's deadness in sin and total depravity, of God predestining some unto life and not others, and God's sovereign, irresistible grace to call sinners to Himself. Regional synods were held in North Africa and Palestine to condemn Pelagianism which culminated with a letter from the bishop of Rome condemning Pelagius and his followers in 418 and in a condemnation by the council of Ephesus in 431. Pelagius was exiled from Palestine and lived the rest of his life in obscurity.

II. *Semi-Pelagianism*

A. Seeking a middle ground

1. **The roots of Semi-Pelagianism.** Although Pelagianism had been soundly condemned, not everyone was satisfied with Augustine's theology either. In southern France, some men tried to find a mediating position between what they saw as the extremes of Pelagianism and Augustinianism. This view gained ascendancy in France for a few decades.
2. **Understanding the fall.** The Semi-Pelagians believed that Adam's sin and fall did corrupt him and pass from him into all humanity, but it was not a complete corruption. The fall did not leave humanity dead in sin but only injured man in his ability to believe in and obey God. Man is in a grave position and in need of saving, but he has the ability to accept or reject the offer of God's salvation. God does predestine some to salvation and not others, but this is done on the basis of God's ability to foresee who would believe when given the chance and so God's decree is made in response to what would be the free exercise of our wills.
3. **The role of grace.** God's grace and the free will of man were seen to be equal powers in salvation. The Semi-Pelagians taught that it was usually man who took the first steps towards God in reconciliation and that God provided all that was deficient in man by grace. The fallenness of humanity required that our nature be healed but we also needed to cooperate in that process. The grace of God is absolutely necessary for salvation in this view, but it is given freely and equally to all through the atoning work of Christ. The difference between who will be saved and who will be condemned is found in human will and its response to God's grace.

B. The Second Council of Orange (529)

1. **Struggles over predestination.** The Semi-Pelagian arguments centered on a rejection of Augustine's concept of predestination. They were able to advance their views through two regional French councils in the 470's. However, their views did not have the same acceptance outside of France. Augustine's views were more prevalent in the other regions of the Western church, though even those who identified more with Augustine did not seem to be willing to affirm his position on predestination.
2. **The council.** A new regional council was called to come together in the French city of Orange to refute the doctrines of the Semi-Pelagians. The council upheld the Augustinian understanding of the fall and its effects on humanity and the primacy of God's grace in salvation. Though this was not an ecumenical council, it was viewed as ending the controversy and a complete defeat of Semi-Pelagianism. However, some have criticized the council for not upholding Augustine's positions on predestination and irresistible grace and claimed that this left the door open for the reemergence of Semi-Pelagianism in later days.

C. Relating to Roman Catholicism

1. **The statements of Rome.** The canons of Orange do a fine job of refuting Semi-Pelagianism and the Roman Catholic Church has never disavowed any of the statements of the canons and cites the canons favorably in their official documents touching on the areas of sin, freedom, the fall, and grace. Yet, one of the accusations that has been made against the Roman Catholic Church in the wake of the Reformation is that its system of salvation is Semi-Pelagian. Is this a fair representation or a mischaracterization of Roman Catholic doctrine?
2. **The teaching of Rome.** Although Rome denounces Semi-Pelagianism in name and claims to uphold the teaching of Orange, they functionally teach Semi-Pelagian doctrine by not identifying the grace spoken of in the canons with regeneration. This allows them to affirm that, although grace is needed for faith, a person who is not born again can freely believe.

Emphases and Theology of the Creed

I. *The Fall*

- A. **Corruption of human nature (Canons 1, 8, 14-15, 17, 19-23).** Adam's fall into sin has the dire consequence of corrupting his nature (**Gen. 6:11-12; Psa. 14:3; Gal. 6:8; Eph. 4:22**). His body and soul are made liable to death (**Gen. 2:17; Eze. 18:4; Rom. 6:23; James 1:15**). His will is enslaved to sin (**John 8:34; Rom. 6:6; 6:16; 7:14; Titus 3:3; 2 Pet. 2:19**). We see here an expression of the doctrine we have come to call total depravity. It is not that man is as evil as he possibly could be, but that he has been corrupted in his whole being to the point that everything he thinks, desires, says, or does is likewise corrupted and sinful (**Isa. 64:6; Rom. 7:18; 8:7-8; 1 Cor. 2:14; Heb. 11:6**). This destroys the Pelagian idea that man was not corrupted by the fall and has the resources within himself to obey God. It also refutes the Semi-Pelagian and Roman Catholic notion that human nature is only injured by the fall, rather than completely dead towards God (**John 5:24-25; Eph. 2:1-8; 1 John 3:14**).
- B. **The communication of original sin (Canons 2, 8, 14, 17, 19-23).** However, it was not only Adam who was corrupted, but all who naturally descend from him. The fact that Adam's nature was corrupted results in him passing on that corruption to his children (**Gen. 5:3**). His descendants also receive the curse and the sentence of death that he received (**Psa. 51:5; Rom. 5:12-19; 1 Cor. 15:22**). This refutes the Pelagian notion that Adam's sin and guilt has nothing to do with us and serves only as a bad example.

II. *Grace and Human Ability*

- A. **The necessity of grace (Canons 3-11, 13, 15, 17, 19-21, 23-25).** No sinner is able to come to God by his own will (**John 3:3-8; 6:44; 12:37-40; Rom. 8:7-8**). God must first act in grace for us to come to faith. This grace is not merely God helping along our natural faculties to enable us to believe but includes the necessity of being born again (**Deut. 30:6; Jer. 24:7; Eze. 11:19; 36:25-26; John 1:12-13; 3:3-8; Eph. 2:5; James 1:18; 1 Pet. 1:23**). This grace is not only necessary for conversion but for all good works done in the Christian life as well (**1 Ki. 8:57-58; Isa. 26:12-13; Phil. 2:12-13**).
- B. **The meaning of grace**
1. **Regeneration and baptism.** The language of the canons on baptism and regeneration can lead to much confusion for us. Canon 5 speaks of the grace that gives faith leading to the regeneration received at baptism. Linking regeneration to baptism seems to clearly state that the person who believes prior to baptism is not born again or converted prior to this point. This understanding would be in line with Semi-Pelagian and Roman Catholic thought. However, this canon and others also speak clearly of the renewing of the will and coming to faith prior to baptism in these cases. Whatever the understanding of the authors of the canons on the issue, it is clear that they teach that the one who comes to faith has been renewed and transformed by the Holy Spirit to be able to embrace Christ. This is what we mean by regeneration, so, whatever else is meant by regeneration in the canons, it teaches that saving grace is necessary for faith.
 2. **Grace in Semi-Pelagian and Roman Catholic thought.** Semi-Pelagians and Roman Catholics agree that grace is necessary for us to have faith. However, they do not mean saving grace that causes us to be born again. That happens later in baptism. They believe, therefore, that those who believe are those who have still yet to be born again by the Holy Spirit, but who are nonetheless helped by the grace of the Spirit and cooperate with His grace to believe. This is a

massive difference from what the Scriptures teach and Reformed theology has confessed. If one who is not born again can believe, then we are not truly dead in sin and we, rather than God, become the guarantors of our salvation, though helped by grace.

Applying the Creed

I. *Relations in Theology*

- A. **Connecting to Christology.** A view that holds that the fall has no effect on humanity will necessarily color how one views Christ and His work. If humanity is not fallen, then Christ's work cannot renew us and there becomes no need to view Christ as divine, since what He accomplishes is technically possible for a normal person. Similarly, if we have not been corrupted body and soul, is it necessary that Jesus had a human soul? If we don't have an accurate picture of what God did in creation and what happened at the fall then we will have a distorted view of Christ, and if we have a wrong view of Christ, it will cause us to make errors about what it means to be creations of God.
- B. **The danger of error.** One of the reasons that it's important to rightly understand theology is because an error in one part of our understanding can cause errors in other areas, that may be even more serious. Even if these problems do not manifest in the person who first espouses the original error, it usually manifests in their followers. Knowing the history of theology helps us to identify errors and where they lead so that we may better avoid them.
- C. **Getting all of it right.** These canons leave a complicated history. They do not teach predestination or irresistible grace explicitly, but clearly try to strike at Pelagianism and Semi-Pelagianism. They also do not speak clearly as to what regeneration is and its relationship to faith. These emphases left the door open for the resurgence of a kind of Semi-Pelagian theology in Roman Catholicism. Although it can be debated that taking the theology of the canons as a whole lends to a Reformed understanding, the document is sufficiently vague to allow for other interpretations. This highlights the importance of clearly and definitively dealing with error so that it does not reemerge when the fervor and clarity of the present dispute fades.

II. *Reading Church History*

- A. **Being grounded in history.** It's helpful for us to be aware of this history so that we can understand our place in it, but also so that we are not taken captive by historical claims. Apologists for Roman Catholicism try to claim that the doctrines that separate us from them have no historical basis and were inventions of the Reformers or rehashing of old heresies. However, knowing about these kinds of documents helps us to see that our beliefs flow out of the historic thought of the church. The statements found at the heart of these canons come more naturally out of the mouth a Protestant, even if others lend themselves to Roman Catholicism.
- B. **Spitting out the bones.** Knowing this history also helps us to see the importance of reading everything in light of the Scriptures. Though we don't want to make the mistake that some Protestants do of being completely dismissive of historical theology, neither do we want to make the mistake of simply taking all that those who came before us said as being true. These debates help to attune us to the subtleties of how one can depart from Scriptural teaching. It can also help clarify our own thinking in light of Scripture so that we are better equipped to confess the truth and defend against error. Hopefully, it allows us to discern problems that we may have missed or thought were insignificant before and know when and why it is necessary to fight for clarity and a particular understanding of the truth and when it is good to make peace when various views may be allowable.