

# “Jerusalem Meets Rome and Finds Babylon: A Study in Church Purity”

Fall 2022-Spring 2023

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## The Heresy of Pelagianism – Various Scriptures

### A. Pelagius

1. A British Monk, born 360 AD, died 418AD, original name was Morgan, came from Wales.
2. As a monk, lived an ascetic lifestyle, studied theology and languages, fluent in Latin and Greek.
3. When he was 20, he moved from Britain to Rome, the major western Roman Empire ecclesiastical center where he found a wider audience for his eloquent preaching style.
4. Rome, being a great city had visitors, many claiming to be Christian, from other great cities of that day.
  - a. Some were devout like Pelagius, but others were the very reverse, morally depraved.
  - b. Pelagius preached vehemently against the sin and vice that he saw around him, rampant in all strata of society.
5. He moved to North Africa in 410 due to an attack on Rome.
6. He was convicted of being a Heretic in Africa in 411 AD and then moved to Palestine.
7. In 415, Bishop John of Jerusalem had an informal meeting between Pelagius and a Spanish priest called Paul Orosius from Africa, and declared Pelagius’ teaching orthodox.
8. The African church appealed to Innocent I the Bishop of Rome, 401-417 AD (still the ecclesiastical head of the Church). He agreed with the African decision and excommunicated Pelagius unless he repented.
9. Pelagius became ill and died in 418 AD.
10. Pelagianism continued to be an argument in the church leadership until 431 AD when they finally agreed and confirmed his beliefs as heresy.

### B. Pelagianism

1. Regarded as the last of the “Great Heresies.” All others since have been a rehash of the previous ones.
2. This Heresy dealt more with the nature of man.
  - a. the question of the effects of the Fall and the nature of man’s will

## b. regarding salvation

- i. Is it ultimately a matter of God's will or the will of man?
- ii. Does God merely make an offer of salvation that human beings can choose to accept or reject, or does God actually save people?
  - Pelagius became concerned that all this talk about how we are saved by grace and not by works might suggest that our works do not matter at all.
  - if God's grace is glorified in the salvation of sinners, might that not be used as an excuse for sin? Which Paul's response was in Ro 3:18 was "whose damnation is just."
- iii. As a reaction to Augustine's prayer, "Grant what Thou commandest, and command what Thou dost desire," he reasoned, that if God commands us to do good works, therefore we must have the ability to perform them, and our performance must contribute to our salvation.
  - Pelagius suffered from a fatally simplistic understanding of sin.
  - He taught that every man is created like Adam, free from sin and equally capable of choosing either good or evil.
  - He denied the inborn bent to sin, and attributed the observable fact that everyone sins due to their environment.
    - And if sin is a matter of individual and separate acts of the will, and people sin because of bad examples around them
    - then virtue is also a matter of individual and separate acts of the will, guided by good examples.
    - in Pelagius' teaching, the function of the Scriptures was to tell us what we should do, and the Gospel shows us the good example of Christ's obedience.
    - He even taught that some Biblical characters, like Daniel, had lived free from sin all their lives.
    - this false position was that it was not only possible, but absolutely necessary, for people to cease from sinning altogether. Having thus ceased from sin, a Christian would be acceptable to God in his own right.
    - The Christian who continued to struggle with sin and also to regard himself as a sinner saved by grace was, according to Pelagius, no different from the pagan who wallowed in sin.
  - While he said that Christians need the grace of God for salvation, in reality he redefined the grace of God to mean the free-will that God gave all people and the gift of the perfect moral law and example of Christ. The grace of God was in other words a matter of gifts that were common to all mankind.

## C. Pelagianism through Church History

## 1. Semi-Pelagianism

- a. Some tried to marry to two – strict biblical teaching of original sin and human free will
- b. The human nature had been damaged making it difficult to choose good, but not utterly impossible with divine help.
- c. If the Biblical image is of man ‘dead in trespasses and sins’ (Ephesians 2:1; Colossians 2:13), the Semi-Pelagian view is that man is injured, maybe even half-dead, but still able to respond to God on his own.
- d. They tried to give God some responsibility for salvation and man some also
- e. They taught that God election according to His foreknowledge was looking down through time and seeing who would respond choosing them.
- f. Condemned at the Council of Orange in 529 AD.

## 2. During the Medieval Church

- a. Formally the verdict of Orange was accepted, yet the idea that man has in some sense free will to choose God was taken almost as a self-evident part of theology.
- b. medieval theology with its elaborate sacramental system made it a matter of cooperation between man and God, though with God taking the initiative. The unbiblical idea of a ‘prevenient grace’ (i.e. a grace that goes before) which God gives to allow all people to believe arose.

## 3. The Reformation

- a. To a great degree the Reformation was a rediscovery of the teachings of Augustine
- b. the great written debate of the Reformation between Erasmus and Luther was on the question of Free Will.
  - i. Erasmus’ little *Diatribes on the Freedom of the Will*, written in 1524 to maintain what had become the standard medieval teaching on the subject,
    - While he was a vigorous critic of the practical abuses of the Catholic Church, Erasmus maintained the medieval theology
    - the Roman Catholic Church affirmed the teachings that had been expounded by Erasmus, and the divide remains to this day.
  - ii. the following year was answered with Luther’s magisterial *Bondage of the Will*
    - Luther upheld Augustine against what he regarded as a latter-day form of Pelagianism.
    - He regarded the book as among the most important that he had ever written.

## 4. Post Reformation

- a. Forms of Pelagianism or Semi-Pelagianism continued to spring up. Many of the Anabaptist groups held to a radical freedom of the will, and thus saw baptism as first

and foremost a declaration by the one being baptized that he or she had ‘decided to follow Jesus.

- b. But the most significant Semi-Pelagian movement of the post-Reformation era was that called by the name of Arminius.
  - i. began to teach a form of universal grace that made all men save-able.
  - ii. He denied a decree of reprobation (the Total Depravity of Man), and modified the teaching on original sin which he had received from his teachers.
    - Their position was effectively that of the Semi-Pelagians, denying that the guilt of Adam’s sin is imputed to his descendants,
    - but maintaining that a hereditary weakness is passed on from Adam, making us all liable to commit sin.
- c. In 1618 the Synod of Dort was summoned in Holland, unequivocally condemned the Arminians, and affirmed the Biblical teaching on original sin and the fact that salvation is all of God.
- d. Nevertheless the Arminian party remained in existence as the Remonstrant Brotherhood, which today claims some 6,000 adherents in the Netherlands.
- e. Arminian teaching also spread in the Church of England in spite of the Calvinistic character of the Thirty-Nine Articles.
- f. After the Restoration and subsequent Ejection of the majority of Puritans from the Church of England, this rationalistic Arminianism became the predominant theology in Anglicanism.
- g. John Wesley drew upon this Arminian Anglican heritage, but tried to join it to a more Biblical view of man’s condition as lost in sin, and condemned in the fall.
  - i. At the same time he taught that God has graciously given everyone the ability to respond to the Gospel.
  - ii. The resulting teaching inevitably tended towards a denial of original sin and an exaltation of free will.

## 5. Today

- a. In their introduction to their edition of *The Bondage of the Will*, Packer and Johnston write, ‘Much modern Protestantism would be neither owned nor even recognized by the pioneer Reformers... Has not Protestantism today become more Erasmian than Lutheran?’
- b. Much of modern Protestantism is in fact Semi-Pelagian at best, and it is not just liberal Protestantism; modern Evangelicalism is deeply infected.

- i. One need only think of the calls for people to ‘decide for Christ,’ and the image of Christ pleading with the sinner.
- ii. Some modern evangelical preachers have even been heard calling for their hearers to ‘give Jesus a chance.’
- iii. one man, regarded by many as a hero, but in reality a dangerous false teacher; is responsible for this, Charles Finney.
  - in order to be ordained as a Presbyterian, he had to give his assent to the Westminster Confession,
  - he later said that he had *never read it*, and when he did read it, he found that he disagreed violently with what he read.
  - in 1824 as an Evangelist, he continued to teach what actually amounted to Pelagianism.
  - In this he is the father of modern-day ‘Decision’ evangelism. Because he believed that every man must have it in his unaided power to repent and turn to Christ,
    - He reasoned that the best forms of Evangelism were those that wrought upon the will, and so he developed his entire evangelistic strategy based on this idea.
    - The result was that rather than relying on the Bible and the Holy Spirit, Finney relied on high-pressure techniques, meetings going on long into the night, emotional harangues, and the use of the startling and the new.
    - They brought thousands to make a profession, but most, if not all, of these went back to the world.

#### D. Considering Scripture, What is the Spiritual Condition and Ability of Man?

##### 1. Are we born innocent and pure as Adam was created?

- a. Ro 5:12-19 Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned-- (For until the law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law. Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those who had not sinned according to the likeness of the transgression of Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come. But the free gift is not like the offense. For if by the one man's offense many died, much more the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abounded to many. And the gift is not like that which came through the one who sinned. For the judgment which came from one offense resulted in condemnation, but the free gift which came from many offenses resulted in justification. For if by the one man's offense death reigned through the one, much more those who receive abundance of

grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ.) Therefore, as through one man's offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man's righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man's obedience many will be made righteous.

- b. Ex 34:7 "keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation."
  - c. Pr 22:15 Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child; The rod of correction will drive it far from him.
    - i. Pr 19:18 Chasten your son while there is hope, And do not set your heart on his destruction.
    - ii. Pr 23:13-14 Do not withhold correction from a child, For if you beat him with a rod, he will not die. You shall beat him with a rod, And deliver his soul from hell.
2. Do we have any Spiritual Capacity to come to God of our own accord?
- a. Ro 3:9-19 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. As it is written: "There is none righteous, no, not one; There is none who understands; There is none who seeks after God. They have all turned aside; They have together become unprofitable; There is none who does good, no, not one." "Their throat is an open tomb; With their tongues they have practiced deceit"; "The poison of asps is under their lips"; "Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness." "Their feet are swift to shed blood; Destruction and misery are in their ways; And the way of peace they have not known." "There is no fear of God before their eyes." Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God.
  - b. Eph 2:1-3 And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others.
  - c. Ro 7:7-11 What shall we say then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! On the contrary, I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, "You shall not covet." But sin, taking opportunity by the commandment, produced in me all manner of evil desire. For apart from the law sin was dead. I was alive once without the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died. And the commandment, which was to

bring life, I found to bring death. For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it killed me.

- d. Jo 1:12-13 But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.
- e. Jo 3:5 Jesus answered, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.
- f. Jas 1:18 Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures.
- g. 1Pe 1:23 having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever,