

DAILY ORAL THEOLOGY

Positively Pelagian

The labels Pelagianism, Semi-Pelagianism, and Arminianism are sometimes treated by staunch Calvinists as one particular erroneous view of salvation. While all three “isms” would be in sharp disagreement with John Calvin’s view of soteriology, that is, his understanding of the doctrine of salvation, Pelagianism, Semi-Pelagianism, and Arminianism are not exactly synonymous. How then do they differ?

Pelagianism

Pelagianism contends that the human will has not been so corrupted by original sin and that it is certainly in the realm of possibility for humans to achieve moral sanctity. The effects of original sin are seen in the environment or culture, and the impact of moral pollution can be minimized through social improvement. The British monk Pelagius (c. 354-415) argued that human effort and merit could result in salvation without divine grace.

Semi-Pelagianism

Semi-Pelagians attempt to land somewhere between Pelagius and Augustine. They hold that faith begins independently of God’s grace; however, grace is subsequently needed for salvation. Thus, predestination is not God determining the elect and the reprobate, but God foreknowing the fate of each human being. Semi-Pelagianism likely first gained traction between A.D. 427 and 529.

Arminianism

Arminianism is a system of doctrine named after Dutch theologian Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609). In contrast to the Lutheran and Calvinist view of predestination as God’s unconditional election unto salvation, Arminius argued that predestination was essentially God foreknowing those individuals who by free will would either accept or reject Christ. Unlike Calvin’s emphasis on the sovereignty of God, Arminius emphasized the responsibility and will of man. One of the key tenets includes partial depravity, where fallen and tainted humanity is still able to seek God with the help of prevenient grace. Another doctrinal point is conditional salvation in which individuals who have confessed Christ can lose their salvation if they actively reject the Holy Spirit’s influence in their lives. Hence, the maintenance of salvation is required for a Christian to retain it. However, some Arminians disagree with that, favoring “eternal security.”

At another time, we will compare what is known as the “Five Points of Calvinism” with five points of Arminianism.