

HERESIES, ANCIENT and MODERN.

Lecture 9 – Moralism At Its Worst

Introduction

Today, we are going to look at the heresy of Pelagius, known as Pelagianism. In this lecture I plan to just consider the man and his teaching. Next week, God willing, I will consider the refutations, the implications and modern manifestations of this heresy.

In general Pelagius taught that sin had not affected human nature at all. Adam's sin set a "bad example," which people choose to follow or not. Christ came to offer a "good example" of life. Salvation means choosing to follow Jesus' example. Pelagianism represents a conscious rejection of God's grace-filled action to save humans and reconcile people with himself. A milder form, called semi-Pelagianism, suggests that we cooperate with God for our justification.¹

Pelagius (AD 354 – 418)

Pelagius was born in AD 354 in Britain. The details of his life are shrouded in mystery, but historians know he became a monk and eventually moved to Rome to teach the Bible. He had a mild personality, and there was no controversy surrounding his early life. Something did get Pelagius' attention: the moral laxity of Christians. Before Christianity was legalized it cost to be a Christian. Now under Constantine, Christianity became secular and with that Christians were not seen as those who pursued holiness. Nominal Christians abounded. This bothered Pelagius. "Pelagius appears to have been motivated by practical piety, i.e. by zeal to lead a perfect Christian life and to encourage others to do so."² The motivating philosophy that drove Pelagius into error is what I will call "moralism"³. I think this is the most helpful one-word description of Pelagius. In the next section I will outline his teaching.

Before 410, Pelagius had to flee Rome to avoid the invasion of the Arian Gothic leader Alaric. He then moved to North Africa, where he met intense opposition, before travelling on to Palestine. In the fall of 416, Augustine and four other bishops wrote a letter urging Pope Innocent I to condemn Pelagianism. Innocent I responded by rejecting the Pelagian teachings and excluding Pelagius from communion with the Catholic Church until they should recant.

Pelagian theology was condemned at the 418 Council of Carthage and he was banished from Jerusalem, after which he vanished from the historical record. His teaching was again condemned by the Council of Ephesus in 431. After that time, a more moderate form of Pelagianism persisted which claimed that

¹ Rose Publishing. Creeds and Heresies . Rose Publishing. Kindle Edition

² Brown, Harold O.J., Heresies, Heresy and Orthodoxy in the History of the Church, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, MA, 1988, Page 202

³ Religious moralism is an emphasis on proper moral behavior to the exclusion of genuine faith in the Gospel.

man's faith was an act of free will unassisted by previous internal grace. That is known as semi-Pelagianism. On 3 July 529 a synod took place at Orange. The Council of Orange⁴ dealt with the Semi-Pelagian doctrine that the human race, though fallen and possessed of a sinful nature, is still "good" enough to be able to lay hold of the grace of God through an act of unredeemed human will. The Council repudiated that view and upheld the Biblical view.

Pelagianism

"Grant what Thou commandest, and command what Thou dost desire." This passage from the pen of Saint Augustine of Hippo was the teaching that provoked this controversy with Pelagius. "The starting point of Pelagius's moralistic theology was his insistence that God would never command anything that is impossible for humans to carry out. Pelagius emphasized humans' unconditional free will and moral responsibility."⁵ Pelagius saw Augustine's prayer as repugnant. "To call a person to something he considers impossible does him no good."⁶ Pelagius suggests that it dishonors a person to be commanded to do something which he or she has no inner ability to do. To take this further, Pelagius, quoting Matthew 5:48 believed that it was within the human capacity to be perfect, otherwise why would God command it? He embraced what we know today as the doctrine of sinless perfection.

Of course, in order to accomplish obedience and perfection on one's own will and power, Pelagius denied original sin. *Original sin* can be defined as the moral corruption we possess as a consequence of Adam's sin, resulting in a sinful disposition manifesting itself in habitually sinful behavior. It can also be described as *total depravity* rendering man total unable to know God, come to God and please God.

Pelagius denied that by suggesting that humans by nature have a clean slate — a state of neutrality — just like Adam did, and it is only through voluntary sin that humans are made wicked. Potentially, then, one could live a sinless life and merit heaven, for there is nothing intrinsically sinful about humans even after Adam and Eve's sin. Pelagius didn't consider humans to be intrinsically damnable after the fall.

Early-church scholar J. N. D. Kelly observes that "the keystone of [Pelagius's] whole system is the idea of unconditional free will and responsibility."⁷ Pelagius taught fallen mankind's will is like Adam's. According to Pelagius the will is totally neutral and is capable of deciding right and wrong at will (so to speak). This means that mankind can inherently choose to do good and carry it out according to their own choice, at any time.

Having denied the imputation of Adam's sin and guilt on the human race freeing mankind to obey God without aid, Pelagius also denied the substitutionary atonement of the Lord Jesus. Just as the first Adam was an example of what not to do, Pelagius taught that Jesus was an example of what to do. We must just obey that example. According to Brown this is the dangerous "aspect of the Pelagian position for

⁴ <http://www.apuritansmind.com/creeds-and-confessions/the-canons-of-the-council-of-orange-circa-529-ad/>

⁵ Holcomb, Justin S.. Know the Heretics (KNOW Series Book 2) (p. 110). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.

⁶ Pelagius, Letter to Demetrias I.

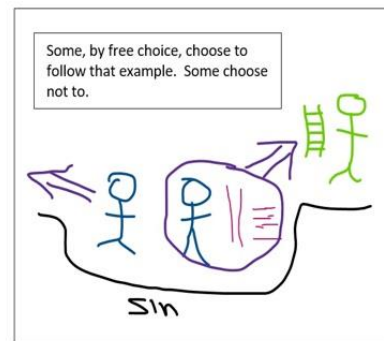
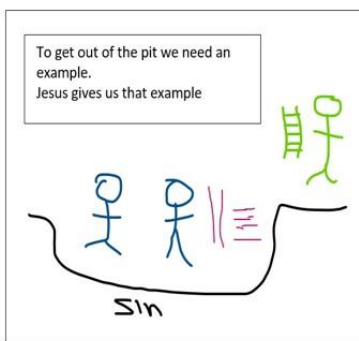
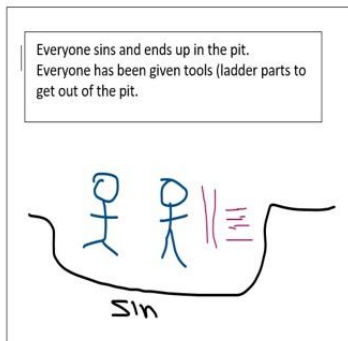
⁷ J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper Collins, 1978), 357.

Christology . . . “it lies in the possible implication that without original sin and a naturally corrupt will, man does not need a Savior so much as a good example.”⁸

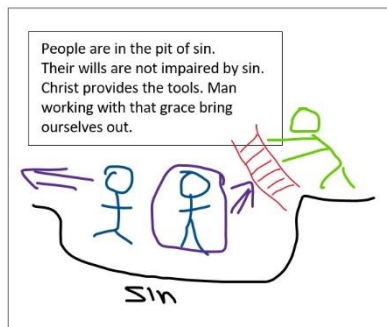
When Pelagius spoke of grace, he meant the natural ability that God had given humanity to control their affairs, rather than a supernatural intervention. At birth, Pelagius would argue, God has given everyone the grace to obey him. “In Pelagius’ view, grace is given to all to enable them to know and choose good.”⁹

Let me try to simplify this.

PELAGIANISM



SEMI-PELAGIANISM



⁸ Brown, Harold O.J., Heresies, Heresy and Orthodoxy in the History of the Church, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, MA, 1988, Page 202

⁹ Brown, Harold O.J., Heresies, Heresy and Orthodoxy in the History of the Church, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, MA, 1988, Page 201

Application

Pelagius wasn't like the other heretics that we have dealt with. He was Trinitarian and held to the divinity and humanity of Christ. We need to learn from this. We need to exercise caution. I've heard some people say things like, "Well he or she believes in Jesus." That's not enough. More questions need to be asked.

"The Pelagian doctrines of the natural goodness of man and the freedom of the human will have arisen time and time again in the history of the church. Despite frequent condemnations by councils and individual leaders, the Pelagian spirit apparently cannot be put down; it really seems to prevail . . ." ¹⁰ It is evidenced inside the professing Church in modified forms and outside. It may be a truism to state that every person born on this planet is a Pelagian until they are confronted with Biblical truth.

In the next lecture we will discuss how the Bible confronts Pelagianism and Semi-Pelagianism.

¹⁰ Brown, Harold O.J., *Heresies, Heresy and Orthodoxy in the History of the Church*, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, MA, 1988, Page 200