Pelagianism:
The Religion of Natural Man

By Michael S. Horton

Cicero observed of his own civilization that people thank the gods for their material prosperity, but never for their virtue, for this is their own doing. Princeton theologian B. B. Warfield considered Pelagianism "the rehabilitation of that heathen view of the world," and concluded with characteristic clarity, "There are fundamentally only two doctrines of salvation: that salvation is from God, and that salvation is from ourselves. The former is the doctrine of common Christianity; the latter is the doctrine of universal heathenism."1

But Warfield's sharp criticisms are consistent with the witness of the church ever since Pelagius and his disciples championed the heresy. St. Jerome, the fourth century Latin father, called it "the heresy of Pythagoras and Zeno," as in general paganism rested on the fundamental conviction that human beings have it within their power to save themselves. What, then, was Pelagianism and how did it get started?

First, this heresy originated with the first human couple, as we shall see soon. It was actually defined and labeled in the fifth century, when a British monk came to Rome. Immediately, Pelagius was deeply impressed with the immorality of this center of Christendom, and he set out to reform the morals of clergy and laity alike. This moral campaign required a great deal of energy and Pelagius found many supporters and admirers for his cause. The only thing that seemed to stand in his way was the emphasis that emanated particularly from the influential African bishop, Augustine. Augustine taught that human beings, because they are born in original sin, are incapable of saving themselves. Apart from God's grace, it is impossible for a person to obey or even to seek God. Representing the entire race, Adam sinned against God. This resulted in the total corruption of every human being since, so that our very wills are in bondage to our sinful condition. Only God's grace, which he bestows freely as he pleases upon his elect, is credited with the salvation of human beings.

In sharp contrast, Pelagius was driven by moral concerns and his theology was calculated to provide the most fuel for moral and social improvement. Augustine's emphasis on human helplessness and divine grace would surely paralyze the pursuit of moral improvement, since people could sin with impunity, fatalistically concluding, "I couldn't help it; I'm a sinner." So Pelagius countered by rejecting original sin. According to Pelagius, Adam was merely a bad example, not the father of our sinful condition-we are sinners because we sin-rather than vice versa. Consequently, of course, the Second Adam, Jesus Christ, was a good example. Salvation is a matter chiefly of following Christ instead of Adam, rather than being transferred from the condemnation and corruption of Adam's race and placed "in Christ," clothed in his righteousness and made alive by his gracious gift. What men and women need is moral direction, not a new birth; therefore, Pelagius saw salvation in purely naturalistic terms-the progress of human nature from sinful behavior to holy behavior, by following the example of Christ.

In his Commentary on Romans, Pelagius thought of grace as God's revelation in the Old and New Testaments, which enlightens us and serves to promote our holiness by providing explicit instruction in godliness and many worthy examples to imitate. So human nature is not conceived in sin. After all, the will is not bound by the sinful condition and its affections; choices determine whether one will obey God, and thus be saved.

In 411, Paulinus of Milan came up with a list of six heretical points in the Pelagian message. (1) Adam was created mortal and would have died whether he had sinned or not; (2) the sin of Adam injured himself alone, not the whole human race; (3) newborn children are in the same state in which Adam was before his fall; (4) neither by the death and sin of Adam does the whole human race die, nor will it rise because of the resurrection of Christ; (5) the law as well as the gospel offers entrance to the Kingdom of Heaven; and (6) even before the coming of Christ, there were men wholly without sin. 2 Further, Pelagius and his followers denied unconditional predestination.

It is worth noting that Pelagianism was condemned by more church councils than any other heresy in history. In 412, Pelagius's disciple Coelestius was excommunicated at the Synod of Carthage; the Councils of Carthage and Milevis condemned Pelagius' De libero arbitrio--On the Freedom of the Will; Pope Innocent I excommunicated both Pelagius and Coelestius, as did Pope Zosimus. Eastern emperor Theodosius II banished the Pelagians from the East as well in AD 430. The heresy was repeatedly condemned by the Council of Ephesus in 431 and the Second Council of Orange in 529. In fact, the Council of Orange condemned even Semi-Pelagianism, which maintains that grace is necessary, but that the will is free by nature to choose whether to cooperate with the grace offered. The Council of Orange even condemned those who thought that salvation could be conferred by the saying of a prayer, affirming instead (with abundant biblical references) that God must awaken the sinner and grant the gift of faith before a person can even seek God.

Anything that falls short of acknowledging original sin, the bondage of the will, and the need for grace to even accept the gift of eternal life, much less to pursue righteousness, is considered by the whole church to be heresy. The heresy described here is called "Pelagianism."

Pelagianism in the Bible

Cain murdered Abel because Cain sought to offer God his own sacrifice. The writer to the Hebrews tells us that Abel offered his sacrifice in anticipation of the final sacrifice, the Lamb of God, and did so by faith rather than by works (Heb. 11). However, Cain sought to be justified by his own works. When God accepted Abel instead, Cain became jealous. His hatred for Abel was probably due in part to his own hatred of God for refusing to accept his righteousness. This pattern had already emerged with the contrast between the fig leaves that Adam and Eve sewed to cover their nakedness. Running from God's judgment, covering up the shame that resulted from sin-these are the characteristics of human nature ever since the fall. "There is no one who is righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks after God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one" (Rom. 3:10-12). The nearer God comes to us, the greater sense we have of our own unworthiness, so we hide from him and try to cover up our shame with our own clever masks.

At the Tower of Babel, the attitude expressed is clearly Pelagian: "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves. " In fact, they were certain that such a united human project could ensure that nothing would be impossible for them (Gen 11:4-6). But God came down, just as they were building upward toward the heavens. "So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city" (v.8). This is the pattern: God provides the sacrifice, and judges those who offer their own sacrifices to appease God. God comes down to dwell with us, we do not climb up to him; God finds us, we do not find him.

The people of Israel regularly found themselves reverting to the pagan way of thinking. God had to remind them, "'Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who depends on flesh for his

strength and whose heart turns away from the LORD But blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is in him.'" Jeremiah responds, "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?... Heal me, O LORD, and I will be healed; save me and I will be saved, for you are the one I praise" (Jer 17:5, 7, 9, 15). Jonah learned the hard way that God saves whomever he wants to save. Just as soon as he declared, "Salvation comes from the LORD," we read: "And the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land" (Jon 2:9-10). The Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar faced a similar confrontation, when his self-confidence was turned to humiliation by God. He finally raised his eyes toward heaven and confessed, "All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: 'What have you done'" (Dn 4:35). The clear message: God saves freely, by his own choice and action, to his own praise and glory.

We find Pelagianism among the Pharisees in the New Testament. Remember, the foundation of Pelagianism is the belief that we do not inherit Adam's sinful condition. We are born morally neutral, capable of choosing which way we will turn. Sin is something that affects us from the outside, so that if a good person sins, it must be due to some external influence. This is why it is so important, according to this way of thinking, to avoid bad company and evil influences: It will corrupt an otherwise good person. This Pelagian mentality pervaded the thinking of the Pharisees, as when they asked Jesus why they he did not follow the Jewish rituals. "Jesus called the crowd to him and said, 'Listen and understand. What goes into a man's mouth does not make him 'unclean,' but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him 'unclean.'" This theological orientation was so unfamiliar to the disciples that Jesus had to restate the point: "For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what make a man 'unclean'" (Mt 15:10-20). Later, Jesus scolded the Pharisees with these harsh words: "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean. Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous, but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness" (Mt 23:25-28).

Therefore, Jesus told them that they must be "born from above" (Jn 3:5). The Pharisees believed that God had given them his grace by giving them the law, and if they merely followed the law and the traditions of the elders, they would remain in God's favor. But Jesus said that they were unbelievers who needed to be regenerated, not good people who needed to be guided. "No man can even come to me unless my Father who sent me draws him" (Jn 6:44), for we must be born again, "not of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God" (Jn 1:13). "Apart from me you can do nothing. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit-fruit that will last" (Jn 15:5, 16).

This message was at the center of the apostolic message, as Paul defended the grace of God against the Judaizing heresy that sought to turn Jesus into merely another Moses. Centering on the person and work of Christ, Paul and the other apostles denied any place for self-confidence before God. Instead, they knew that we possess neither the ability, free will, power, nor the righteousness to repair ourselves and escape the wrath of God. It must all be God's work, Christ's work, or there is no salvation at all. Surely the Judaizing heresy that troubled the apostles was larger than the issue of Pelagianism, but self-righteousness and self-salvation lay at the bottom of it. As such, the Council of Jerusalem, recorded in

Acts 15, was the first church council to actually condemn this heresy in the New Testament era.

Pelagianism in Church History

Every dark age in church history was due to the creeping influence of the human-centered gospel of "pulling oneself up by the bootstraps." Whenever God is seen as the sole author and finisher of salvation, there is health and vitality;. To the degree that human beings are seen as agents of their own salvation, the church loses its power, since the Gospel is "the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes" (Rom 1:16).

Throughout the period that is popularly known as the "dark ages," Pelagianism was never officially endorsed, but it was certainly common and perhaps even the most popular and widespread tendency among the masses. That should come as no surprise, since thinking good of our nature and of possibilities for its improvement is the tendency of our sinful condition. We are all Pelagians by nature. There were debates, for instance, in the eighth century, but these did not end well for those who defended a strict Augustinian point of view. Since Pelagianism had been condemned by councils, no one dared defend a view as "Pelagian," but Semi-Pelagianism was acceptable, since the canons of the Council of Orange, which condemned Semi-Pelagianism, had been lost and were not recovered until after the closing of the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century.

On the eve of the Reformation, there were fresh debates over free will and grace. Reformers benefited from something of a renaissance of Augustinianism. In the fourteenth century, two Oxford lecturers, Robert Holcot and Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Bradwardine, became leading antagonists in this battle. Two centuries before the Reformation, Bradwardine wrote The Case of God Against the New Pelagians, but, "Holcot and a host of later interpreters found Bradwardine's defense of the 'case of God' was at the expense of the dignity of man." 3 If that sounds familiar, it should, since the truth and its corresponding objections never change. The archbishop's own story gives us some insight to the place of this debate:

Idle and a fool in God's wisdom, I was misled by an unorthodox error at the time when I was pursuing philosophical studies. Sometimes I went to listen to the theologians discussing this matter [of grace and free will], and the school of Pelagius seemed to me nearest the truth. In the philosophical faculty I seldom heard a reference to grace, except for some ambiguous remarks. What I heard day in and day out was that we are masters of our own free acts, that ours is the choice to act well or badly, to have virtues or sins and much more along this line." Therefore, "Every time I listened to the Epistle reading in church and heard how Paul magnified grace and belittled free will-as is the case in Romans 9, 'It is obviously not a question of human will and effort, but of divine mercy,' and its many parallels-grace displeased me, ungrateful as I was." But later, things changed:

"However, even before I transferred to the faculty of theology, the text mentioned came to me as a beam of grace and, captured by a vision of the truth, it seemed I saw from afar how the grace of God precedes all good works with a temporal priority, God as Savior through predestination, and natural precedence. That is why I express my gratitude to Him who has given me this grace as a free gift."

Bradwardine begins his treatise, "The Pelagians now oppose our whole presentation of predestination and reprobation, attempting either to eliminate them completely or, at least, to show that they are dependent on personal merits." 4

These are important references, since many think of the emphasis of Luther in The Bondage of the Will and of Calvin in his many writings on the subject as extreme, when in actual fact, they were in the mainstream of Augustinian revival. In fact, Luther's mentor, Johann von Staupitz, was himself a defender of Augustinian orthodoxy against the new tide of Pelagianism, and contributed his own treatise, On Man's Eternal Predestination. "God has covenanted to save the elect. Not only is Christ sent as a substitute for the believer's sins, he also makes certain that this redemption is applied. This happens at the moment when the sinner's eyes are opened again by the grace of God, so that he is able to know the true God by faith. Then his heart is set afire so that God becomes pleasing to him. Both of these are nothing but grace, and flow from the merits of Christ Our works do not, nor can they, bring us to this state, since man's nature is not capable of knowing or wanting or doing good. For this barren man God is sheer fear."

But for the believer, "the Christian is just through the righteousness of Christ," and Staupitz even goes so far as to say, that this suffering of Christ "is sufficient for all, though it was not for all, but for many that his blood was poured out." 5 This was not an extreme statement, as it is often considered today, but was the most common way of talking about the atonement's effect: sufficient for everyone, efficient for the elect alone.

To be sure, these precursors of the Reformation were not yet articulating a clear doctrine of justification by the imputation of Christ's righteousness, but the official position of the Roman Catholic Church even before the Reformation was that grace is necessary for even the will to believe and live the Christian life. This is not far enough for evangelicals, but to fall short of this affirmation is to lose touch with even the "catholic" witness shared at least on paper by Protestants and Roman Catholics.

What About Today?

Ever since the Enlightenment, the Protestant churches have been influenced by successive waves of rationalism and moralism that have made the Pelagian heresy attractive. It is fascinating, if frustrating, to read the great architects of modern liberalism as they triumphantly announce their project. They sound as if it were a new theological enterprise to say that human nature is basically good, history is marked by progress, that social and moral improvement will create happiness, peace, and justice. Really, it is merely a revival of that age-old religion of human nature. The rationalistic phase of liberalism saw religion not as a plan of salvation, but as a method of morality. The older views concerning human sinfulness and dependence on divine mercy were thought by modern theologians to stand in the way of the Enlightenment project of building a new world, a tower reaching to heaven, just as Pelagius viewed Augustinian teaching as impeding his project of moral reform.

Instead of defining Christianity in terms of an announcement of God's saving work in Jesus Christ, Schleiermacher and the liberal theologians redefined it as a "feeling." Ironically, the Arminian revivals shared with the Enlightenment a confidence in human ability. This Pelagian spirit pervaded the frontier revivals as much as the New England academy. Although poets such as William Henley might put it in more sophisticated language ("I am the master of my fate, the captain of my soul"), evangelicals out on the frontier began adapting this triumph of Pelagianism to the wider culture.

Heavily influenced by the New Haven theology and the Second Great Awakening, Charles Finney was nearly the nineteenth-century reincarnation of Pelagius. Finney denied original sin. "Moral depravity is sin itself, and not the cause of sin," 6 and he explicitly rejects original sin in his criticism of the Westminster Confession, 7 referring to the notion of a sinful nature as "anti-scriptural and nonsensical dogma." 8 According to Finney, we are all born morally neutral, capable either of choosing good or evil. Finney argues throughout by

employing the same arguments as the German rationalists, and yet because he was such a successful revivalist and "soul-winner," evangelicals call him their own. Finney held that our choices make us either good or sinful. Here Finney stands closer to the Pharisees than to Christ, who declared that the tree produced the fruit rather than vice versa. Finney's denial of the substitutionary atonement follows this denial of original sin. After all, according to Pelagius, if Adam can be said to be our agent of condemnation for no other reason than that we follow his poor example, then Christ is said to be our agent of redemption because we follow his good example. This is precisely what Finney argues: "Example is the highest moral influence that can be exerted. If the benevolence manifested in the atonement does not subdue the selfishness of sinners, their case is hopeless." 9 But how can there be a "benevolence manifested in the atonement" if the atonement does not atone? For those of us who need an atonement that not only subdues our selfishness, but covers the penalty for our selfishness, Finney's "gospel," like Pelagius's, is hardly good news.

According to Finney, Christ could not have fulfilled the obedience we owed to God, since it would not be rational that one man could atone for the sins of anyone besides himself. Furthermore, "If he obeyed the law as our substitute, then why should our own return to personal obedience be insisted upon as the sine qua non of our salvation?"10 One wonders if Finney was actually borrowing directly from Pelagius' writings. Many assume "that the atonement was a literal payment of a debt, which we have seen does not consist with the nature of the atonement. It is objected that, if the atonement was not the payment of the debt of sinners, but general in its nature, as we have maintained, it secures the salvation of no one. It is true, that the atonement, of itself, does not secure the salvation of any one." 11

Furthermore, Finney denies that regeneration depends on the supernatural gift of God. It is not a change produced from the outside. "If it were, sinners could not be required to effect it. No such change is needed, as the sinner has all the faculties and natural attributes requisite to render perfect obedience to God." 12 Therefore, "...regeneration consists in the sinner changing his ultimate choice, intention, preference." Those who insist that sinners depend on the mercy of God proclaim "the most abominable and ruinous of all falsehoods. It is to mock [the sinner's] intelligence!"13

Of the doctrine of justification, Finney declared it to be "another gospel," since "for sinners to be forensically pronounced just, is impossible and absurd. As has already been said, there can be no justification in a legal or forensic sense, but upon the ground of universal, perfect, and uninterrupted obedience to law...The doctrine of an imputed righteousness, or that Christ's obedience to the law was accounted as our obedience, is founded on a most false and nonsensical assumption" and "representing the atonement as the ground of the sinner's justification has been a sad occasion of stumbling to many." 14

From Finney and the Arminian revivalists, evangelicalism inherited as great a debt to Pelagianism as modern liberalism received from the Enlightenment version directly. When evangelists appeal to the unbeliever as though it was his choice that determines his destiny, they are not only operating on Arminian assumptions, but Pelagian assumptions that are rejected even by the official position of the Roman Catholic Church as a denial of grace. Whenever it is maintained that an unbeliever is capable by nature of choosing God, or that men and women are capable of not sinning or of reaching a state of moral perfection, that's Pelagianism. Finney even preached a sermon titled, "Sinners Bound To Change Their Own Hearts." When preachers attack those who insist that the human problem is sinfulness and the wickedness of the human heart-that's Pelagianism. When one hears the argument, whether from the Enlightenment (Kant's "ought implies can"), or from Wesley, Finney, or modern teachers, that "God would never have commanded the impossible," 15 they are

echoing the very words of Pelagius. Those who deny that faith is the gift of God are not merely Arminians or Semi-Pelagians, but Pelagians. Even the Council of Trent (condemning the reformers) anathematized such a denial as Pelagianism.

When evangelicals and fundamentalists assume that infants are pure until they reach an "age of accountability," or that sin is something outside-in the world or in the sinful environment or in sinful company that corrupts the individual-they are practicing Pelagians. That which in contemporary evangelicalism is often considered "Calvinism" is really "Augustinianism," which embraces orthodox Roman Catholics and Lutherans as well. And that which in our circles today is often considered "Arminianism" is really Pelagianism.

The fact that recent polls indicate that 77% of the evangelicals today believe that human beings are basically good and 84% of these conservative Protestants believe that in salvation "God helps those who help themselves" demonstrates incontrovertibly that contemporary Christianity is in a serious crisis. No longer can conservative, "Bible-believing" evangelicals smugly hurl insults at mainline Protestants and Roman Catholics for doctrinal treason. It is evangelicals today, every bit as much as anyone else, who have embraced the assumptions of the Pelagian heresy. It is this heresy that lies at the bottom of much of popular psychology (human nature, basically good, is warped by its environment), political crusades (we are going to bring about salvation and revival through this campaign), and evangelism and church growth (seeing conversion as a natural process, just like changing from one brand of soap to another, and seeing the evangelist or entrepreneurial pastor as the one who actually adds to the church those to be saved).

At its root, the Reformation was an attack on Pelagianism and its rising influence, as it choked out the life of Christ in the world. It asserted that "salvation is of the LORD" (Jon 2:9), and that "it therefore does not depend on the decision or effort of man, but on the mercy of God" (Rom 9:16). If that message is recovered, and Pelagianism is once more confronted with the Word of God, the glory of God will again fill the earth.

Notes

1. B. B. Warfield, The Plan of Salvation (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, reprinted 1980), p. 33.
2. Taken from the entry on Pelagianism in the Westminster Dictionary of Church History.
3. Heiko Oberman, Forerunners of the Reformation (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), p.134.
4. Ibid., pp. 151-162.
5. Ibid., pp. 175-200.
6. Charles Finney, Finney's Systematic Theology (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1976), p. 172.
7. Ibid., p. 177.
8. Ibid., p. 179.
9. Ibid., p. 209.
10. Ibid., p. 206.
11. Ibid., p. 213.
12. Ibid., p.221.
13. Ibid., p.226.
14. Ibid., pp. 319-323.
15. B. R. Rees, ed., The Letters of Pelagius and His Followers (Woodbridge, England: The Boydell Press, 1991), p.169.

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