Pelagianism
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Introduction

Early in the course I made the claim, which I did not intend to be controversial, that Pelagius is a *heretic*. After some e-mail discussions, it seems this claim requires explanation and justification. I hope that this discussion stimulates you (as it has me) to a more thoughtful theological anthropology.

Traditionally Pelagius has been considered an arch-heretic in the Western Church. Modern scholarship, however, has revised the picture by arguing that he did not take the more extreme positions later associated with *Pelagianism* (1). There is, however, an overwhelming consensus in the Western Church that the positions traditionally ascribed to Pelagius and certainly taught by his key followers are heretical and outside the pale of Christian orthodoxy (2).

I. Background

Pelagius was a British monk who appears on the historical radar ca.380 in Rome (3). He disappeared more mysteriously from the radar ca. 410. His interest seems to have been to promote asceticism, i.e., withdrawal from the world as a means to holiness and that as a means to justification or righteousness before God (4).

It is likely that Pelagius and his associates were drawn to Rome by Jerome's strongly moralist (c.342-420) preaching (5). Pelagius himself apparently attracted a following by teaching that humans are not Adam's children, but, like Adam, have the ability to sin or not to sin (6). He was, ironically, like much of Reformed theology, a *creationist* regarding the soul, i.e., he taught each soul is created immediately by God so that it does not participate in original sin (7).

On the sacking of Rome (ca.409-10) by Alaric the Goth, Pelagius went to North Africa, settling in Carthage. His colleague, Celestius (or Coelestius) moved to Jerusalem where he was charged by Paulinus of Milan of denying the transmission of Adam's sin to all humanity but was cleared by a diocesan synod.

The Pelagians also presupposed that ought equals can, i.e., justice requires that God may only require of us what we are freely able to do. Thus they interpreted passages such as Deut 30.19 to imply that humans must have the ability to will the contrary relative to the divine will (8)

A. Augustine (354-430)

On the other side, Augustine from at least 396, was teaching that humanity was a *massa peccati* (lump of sin) (9). In his *Confessions* (397) he was teaching that all humans are born sinful because we were in Adam (10). His famous formula was, *posse peccare, posse non peccare*, before the fall (*ante lapsum*) but *non posse, non peccare* after the fall (*post lapsum*). As the Puritans (i.e., 16th through early 18th century English, Dutch and North American Calvinists) put it in their rhyme: 'In Adam's fall, sinned we all'.

It was not Pelagius himself but a follower, namely *Julian of Eclanum* (c.386-c.455), who initiated the famous literary battle with Augustine over the doctrines of sin, grace, predestination and free will. Augustine taught the view later described as 'total depravity' or 'total inability', i.e., humans apart from prevenient grace [grace which works first] are unable to will to choose to believe. Remember, the Pelagians (particularly Julian) had affirmed the total freedom of the human will as the necessary postulate of moral responsibility. Not so for Augustine. In Augustine's view, one is guilty because one was in Adam. When we sin actually, we're only doing what comes naturally.

For Augustine our will is so sin impaired by Adam's fall that it only chooses evil apart from Grace. Pelagius, Celestius and Julian, naturally denied predestination while Augustine affirmed it. For Augustine, one believes because he is elect. It was unthinkable that humans should exercise the initiative in salvation.

Augustine began responding to the Pelagians in 411-2. He first defended infant baptism as the means by which God washes away original sin in response to Coelestius and Julian who had argued that children were eligible for eternal life without baptism.
This was a shocking affront. For most of the ancient Church infant baptism was a given, since it was widely understood that it washed away original sin. This one of the reasons Augustine taught it and the Pelagian denial of the grace of baptism to the children of believers was one of the most heinous aspects of their theology (11).

He also criticised the Pelagian hermeneutic, their view of grace, their denial of original sin. He defended predestination (426/7 and again in 428/9) and the perseverance of the saints (12).

B. Augustinian Realism

Where Paul worked clearly and consistently with "forensic" (legal) categories, Augustine did not, at least not exclusively. He responded (in 412 AD) to the Pelagians by arguing the following:

- Human nature was created blameless, without *vitium*. All sin and weakness is *ex originali peccato* (13)
- The threat of punishment upon the first disobedience entailed bodily & spiritual death (14).
- Adam's sin is transmitted from him to all humans through natural descent (15).
- The reason infants baptised, is to wash away original sin (16).
- Just as sin is propagated (traducere) by natural descent, grace is *infused* (17).
- Romans 5.12 teaches that *in quo* all sinned. (A misreading of the Greek here as as a locative rather than a causal phrase?) In this he may have followed 'Ambrosiaster' (18).
- Original sin is to be distinguished from actual sin. Original sin is not just the first actual sin. It is corporate in nature. Therefore we are born to condemnation. We sin *in actu* because we are sinners, in Adam (19).
- After baptism, the guilt of original sin is removed, but *concupiscentia* (spark of sin, yearning of lower appetites) remains (20) .
- The result of Adam's sin is that humanity is now *mass damnitionis* or *massa peccatorum et impiorum* corporately and individually (21).
- The result of original sin is spiritual and physical death (22).
- Therefore grace is, in the nature of the case, 'free' and unmerited.
- God justly condemns those who have not heard the gospel because all have sinned in Adam.

II. The Ecclesiastical Response

Augustine's views, formally at least, carried the day in the West (23). Pelagius was excommunicated by Pope Innocent I (410-7) and Pelagianism condemned by four regional councils, one ecumenical council and at least one Roman Catholic council not to mention numerous Protestant synods, assemblies and confessions.

A. Councils of Carthage (412, 416 and 418)

Coelestius was condemned at Carthage in 412. Pelagianism was condemned also in 416 and 418.

B. Council of Ephesus (431)

Pelagianism was anathematized at the Third Ecumenical (universal) council, on 22 July in Ephesus (24).

C. The Council of Orange (529)

The 2nd Council of Orange (Aurausio, France) in 529 upheld Augustine's view of grace and condemned Pelagianism unequivocally.

D. Council of Trent (*Sessio Quinta*)

On 17 June, 1546, the Roman Council of Trent condemned Pelagius in five chapters (25).

E. Protestant Synods and Confessions

Pelagianism was condemned universally by the Protestants. Some noteable examples.
- •2nd Helvetic (1561/66) 8-9. (Swiss-German Reformed)
- •Augsburg Confession (1530) Art. 9, 18 (Lutheran)
- •Gallican Confession (1559) Art. 10 (French Reformed)
- •Belgic Confession (1561) Art. 15 (Lowlands, French/Dutch/German Reformed)
- •The Anglican Articles (1571), 9. (English)

- •Canons of Dort (1618-9), 3/4.2 (Dutch/German/French Reformed)

To say that Pelagianism is heresy, is to stand in the broadest stream of the Western Church. It is not a narrow, bigoted position, at least not as seen from the perspective of the historic Westen Christian tradition.

III. Theological Analysis

A. Moralism

Its important to realise that he was a *moralist*, i.e., he was very much concerned about Christian behaviour and was concerned that the pessimistic Augustinian anthropology and soteriology (doctrine of salvation) would discourage good behaviour. Augustine's prayer, 'Give what you command, and command what you will', seemed to Pelagius, to strip humans of their freedom and hence moral responsibility (26).

Most soteriological moralism is rooted in an attempt to get folk to behave properly. The question is not whether to behave, but why? For justification or as a result of it? Historically and theologically attempts to get folk to be good apart from divine grace must be judged a failure. This would seem to be the lesson of Paul's Epistle to the Galatians and the Reformation generally (27).

Historically it has been the case that those who have sided with Pelagius; i.e., those who have broken the link between Adam and us; have also broken the link between the redeemed and Christ. They have argued that just as one is not sinful 'in Adam', one is not righteous 'in Christ'. Grace, in this system, only helps one to do what one could do naturally. It is not, therefore of the essence of salvation.

B. The Pelagian *a Priori*

The key unstated presupposition, in Pelagius' argument, was the there is a universal standard of justice to which all, even God are bound. Flowing from this belief is the further belief that justice requires absolute freedom of the will. Why? Because if God is absolutely sovereign, then humans must be only puppets, thus depriving God of his justice by stripping humans of their freedom and their moral responsibility. God is just. Therefore humans must have a free will (28).

C. Anthropology

Pelagius notion of justice required him to deny any link between Adam and us. God, he argued, cannot blame us for another's sin (29). Since Pelagius broke entirely the link (whether biological or legal) between Adam and us, he concluded that the only way in which sin can be transmitted is through imitation of Adam's example (30). '[B]efore he begins exercising his will, there is only in him what God has created' (31).

D. Soteriology

Pelagius began with a notion of justice which he inherited from his culture. He brought this notion to Scripture and it blinded him to several important biblical notions. Flowing from this error was another.

E. Adam and Us

In order to maintain his notion of justice he had to break not only the link between Adam and us, but also between Christ and us. As a result he denied the doctrine of original sin.
In the face of rather overwhelming amount of biblical data indicating a link between Christ and his people, few people have been willing to be as ruthlessly consistent (32).

F. Grace and Free Will

In Augustinian theology, grace (L. *gratia*) is the unearned and undeserved favour of God. It is the *sine qua non* of the Christian doctrine of salvation. This has been the Western consensus since the 4th century. On this point, Rome and the Protestants agreed, if only formally. The conflict between Rome and the Protestants was never, whether grace and faith, but what sort of grace and what sort of faith?
Grace, in the Pelagian theology, however, became superfluous. Since we are not sinners in Adam, we have no need of grace from the beginning. At best, grace can be said to bring out our natural abilities.

G. Perfectionism

Pelagius went boldly where few have dared to go. He went on to argue that not only do we not need grace, we can if we will, observe God's commandments without sinning (33). This must be since Jesus said, 'Be holy as your heavenly Father is holy'. He would not have said so if we could not do it. He did not expect that many would do from childhood to death, but that through struggle one could attain a state of perfection by the exercise of the will (34).

H. Two Adams

The Pelagians retained, however, the analogy between Adam and Christ (Romans 5.12-21). This forced them to argue that what was true for us relative to Adam; i.e., one falls by imitating Adam; is also true for us relative to Christ; i.e., one becomes righteous by exercising the will to sinlessness in imitation of Jesus.

I. Vicarious Atonement

Since Anselm (1033-1109) most of the Church has understood Christ's death in forensic, i.e., legal categories. In *Cur Deus Homo*, Anselm argued that God having willed to redeem us, he could so in no other way than by the incarnation. The penal, substitutionary doctrine of the atonement was also at the heart of the Protestant Christologies and soteriologies, whether

Calvinist or Lutheran. Since the 18th century this has been the evangelical doctrine of the atonement as well.

Not so, however, for the Pelagians. In their scheme, it has been considered unjust for Christ to have suffered vicariously *for* sinners. How can one righteous person suffer for others, especially the unrighteous? This was Pelagius' argument and has been followed in more Modern times by Hugo Grotius (1583-1645) and Charles Grandison Finney (1792-1875) (35). The Pelagian move here is perhaps the classic example of the power of an *a priori* notion which comes to control one's theology.

Conclusion: The Protestant Answer

The Protestants, beginning with Martin Luther (1483-1546) and continuing in John Calvin (1509-64) realised that part of the problem was the *realistic* theory of sin. That is, Augustine had assumed certain ontological categories, that is, evil is the absence of being, and grace is a sort of stuff which the Church dispenses.

The Protestants realised that our problem is not a matter of being or lack thereof. Sin is not a thing (*res*) which can be transmitted sexually any more than divine justice (*iustitia Dei*) is a thing which can be dispensed.

Rather sin and righteousness belong to a moral category. Justice is one of God's communicable moral attributes - that is, one of the attributes which he gives to or shares with humans. This realisation moved them to strengthen the *federal* notion of union with Adam and Christ by moving to a *forensic* doctrine of justification.

True, we are all biologically connected to our first parents (we are all one blood Scripture says), but more importantly, we are legally identified with them so that we are reckoned as we ourselves had disobeyed. The forensic category is absolutely necessary, in the case of Christ, for obvious reasons. Working consistently from the Two-Adam notion they reasoned that our relations to Adam can also be considered forensic (legal) instead of realistic.

Thus just as sin was *imputed* to all in Adam, in the same way, by virtue of gracious divine election to union with Christ (*unio Christi*) believers are all 'in Christ'. Thus Paul says that we died and were raised with Christ and are presently seated with him. This is forensic, not realistic language.

Sinners benefit from the righteousness Christ accomplished both actively and passively (from L. *passio*, suffering) through faith (*per fidem*) i.e., the instrument which lays hold of Christ's obedience (*iustitia Christi aliena*), i.e., Christ's alien righteousness. Christ's *iustitia* is imputed to believers as if they had themselves accomplished it (36).

ENDNOTES

1. Pelagius has been partially rehabilitated in Modern scholarship. See G. Bonner, 'How Pelagian Was Pelagius?' *Studia Patristica* (1966): 350-8; J. Ferguson, Pelagius: A Historical and Theological Study (Cambridge, 1956).

2. Heresy is a noun derived from the Greek noun haeresis (1 Cor 11.19; Gal 5.20; 2 Peter 2.1) meaning a divisive sect. Modern Christianity considers that there can be no such thing as 'heresy' since Modernity understands religion to be primarily sociological and historical, i.e., the description of religious sensibilities. Historic Christianity, however, has always considered that the Christian religion, contains a necessary body of propositional truths revealed by God which one must affirm in order to be a Christian. Heresy in this scheme is a substantial deviation from this body of necessary truths.

3. He was monachus, i.e., an ascetic who belonged to no particular order (J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* rev. (New York, 1978), 357. The primary source of Pelagius' writings is found in A. Souter, ed. Pelagius' Exposition of

4. Thirteen Epistles of St. Paul 3 vol. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922-31). See also, Pelagius, *Pelagius's Commentary on St Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, trans. T. de Bruyn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

5. Jerome is one of the greatest of the Latin speaking Fathers. He was the primary translator of the Biblia Vulgate (i.e., the common language Bible), the Latin Bible which dominated Western piety and theology until the middle of the 16th century. He was a hermit who taught himself Hebrew in the desert as a way of overcoming the lusts of the flesh. As a preacher in Rome (382-5) he stressed withdrawal from the world as the road to holiness. From 386 he settled in Jerusalem to work on the Vulgate.

6. The formula as it is found in Augustine is *posse peccare, posse non peccare*.

7. *peccatum originalis*.

8. "This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live" (Deut. 30.19). Pelagius argued for three features in action: 1)power (*posse*); 2)will (*velle*); 3)the ability to make it so (*esse*). Kelly, 358.

9. Augustine, *Ad Simplicianum*.

10. *Confessions*, ch.7.

11. Please note that though Luther retained infant baptism, he did so on different grounds. For Luther, baptism is the gospel made visible. For Calvin, it was the sign and seal of the covenant.

12. Augustine's anti-Pelagian tracts are widely available in English on the web in the *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* series.

13. *De natura et gratia*, iii.3-iv.4, *Corpus Scriptorum ecclesiaticorum latinorum*, vol.60, ed. C.F. Urba & J. Zycha (Vienna, 1913), 238.-236.6; McGrath, 219.

14. *De peccatorum meritis et remissione*, ex. Retractiones, 2.23. *Nicene & Post Nicene Fathers* vol. V.

15. *De pecc*. 1, 9.

16. *De pecc*. 1, 10.

17. *De pecc*, 1.17; 1.18, p.22.

18. McGrath, 216.

19. *De pecc*, 1,11-2.

20. *De pecc*. 2,46.

21. McGrath, 218. *De diversibus quaestionibus ad Simplicianum* I.ii.12, *Corpus Christianorum*: Series Latina, vol.44, ed. A. Mutzenbecher (Turnhold: Brepols, 1970), 48.620-7.

22. *De natura*, McGrath, 219.

23. Among the doctrines which the Council anathematized were the 'natural' rather than penal mortality of Adam; denial of infant baptism; restricting the work of grace to past sins only.

24. Kelly, 361. Council of Ephesus, canon IV. 'If any of the clergy should fall away, and publicly or privately presume to maintain the doctrines of Nestorius or Celestius, it is declared just by the holy Synod that these should be deposed'. *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 14.229-30.

25. Schaff, Creeds of Christendom, 2.83-8.

26. *da quod iubes et iube quod vis* (*De dono perseverantia*, 53). See Kelly, 387.

27. See Galatians 2.15-3.19; 5.16-6.10.

28. Like most free-will arguments, theodicy, i.e., the need to justify God, is at the core as well. Throughout Scripture, however, one finds precious little such theodicy. See Exodus 9; Job [passim] and Romans 9, for examples of fairly shocking disregard for what we might consider 'fairness'.

29. *In Romanos* 5.15 '*Ne in forma aequalitas putaretur....Plus praeualuit iustitia in vivifando quam peccatum in occidendo, quia Adam tantum se et suos posteros interfecit, Christus autem et qui erant tunc in corpore et posteros liberavit*' (Souter, 46). See also his comments on vv.12-4.

30. *In Romanos* 5.12,16. Kelly, 359.

31. Augustine, *de gratia Christi et peccato originali* (418), 2.14

32. Paul used the locative expression *en Christo* approx. 87 times, just to cite one example. This expression grammatically, is stronger than Pelagius' theory admits. For Paul, believers are legally united with Christ in his death and resurrection. They are seated with him in the heavenlies. See Rom 6.11, 8.1-2, 39; 1 Cor 1.1-4, 30; 15.18-22, 31; 2 Cor 5.17; Gal 2.17; 3.28; Eph 1.1-15; 2.6-10; Col 3.1.

33. Augustine, *de gest. Pelag.* 16. Kelly, 360.

34. *Ad Demet.*, 27. *Aug. de gest.* Pelag. 20. Kelly, 360.

35. See Charles Finney, *Finney's Systematic Theology,* ed. J. H. Fairchild (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1976).

36. The *Heidelberg Catechism* (1563) Q.60 states this nicely.