

Historical Theology

Pelagianism and Semi-Pelagianism

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August 29 & September 12, 2021

Have you ever heard these statements?

“People are, for the most part, good.”

“Good people go to heaven.”

“People must, by their own free will, trust in Jesus as their Savior.”

“When a person believes the gospel of Jesus Christ they become born again.”

These statements reflect the same theology that was taught by Pelagius and his followers and which were opposed by Augustine in the 5th Century.

They were later modified and expressed through others in what has become known as Semi-Pelagianism (also known as Semi-Augustinianism, Arminianism). They can be found in many churches in our day that would identify themselves as Evangelical.

The key figures involved in the Pelagian controversy were Pelagius (350?-420) and Augustine (354-430).

Before the controversy broke out, Pelagius had taken offense at Augustine’s famous prayer. “Grant what You command, and command what You will” [Confessions, X, 29]. Pelagius was bothered by the thought that God must give by grace the ability to do what He commands. (Sproul, Faith Alone, 135-36) “Pelagius assumed that God cannot be just and command something that requires grace to perform. Responsibility assumes ability. Since man is responsible to act in perfect virtue, he must be able to act in perfect virtue.” (Ibid. 136)

“At the Synod of Carthage the Pelagian views, expressed chiefly by Coelestius [a disciple of Pelagius] were summarized:

“[Pelagius taught] that Adam was made mortal and would have died whether he had or had not sinned—that Adam’s sin injured himself alone, and not the human race—[that] infants at birth are in that state in which Adam was before his falsehood—that the whole human race neither dies on account of Adam’s death or falsehood, nor will rise again in virtue of Christ’s resurrection—[that] the law admits men to the kingdom of heaven as well as the gospel—[that] even before the advent of our Lord there were impeccable men, i.e., men without sin—that man can be without sin and keep the divine commands easily if he will.” (Ibid.)

“The Pelagians clearly denied the doctrine of original sin. They did not deny the availability of grace, but they insisted grace is unnecessary for attaining a sinless life or entrance into heaven. Grace facilitates the achieving of righteousness, but it can be reached without it.” (Ibid.)

Deuteronomy 24:16 is used to support the Pelagian denial of original sin: **“Father’s shall not be put to death for *their* sons, nor shall sons be put to death for *their* fathers; everyone shall be put to death for his own sin.”**

“The term original sin refers to Adam’s sin of disobedience in eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil and its effects upon the rest of the human race. *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.” The doctrine of original sin focuses particularly on its effect on our internal nature and our standing before God.” (<https://www.gotquestions.org/original-sin.html>)

“Pelagianism was condemned at the Synod of Carthage in 418 and at the Council of Ephesus in 431.” (<https://www.gotquestions.org/original-sin.html>)

“**Semi-Pelagianism** was promulgated in the fifth century AD by John Cassian and some other church leaders in France. It took a middle-of-the-road approach to depravity; we are depraved, but not totally so. Semi-Pelagianism allows that humanity is tainted by sin, but not to the extent that we cannot cooperate with God’s grace on our own (**synergism**). Semi-Pelagianism is, in essence, partial depravity as opposed to total depravity. We are sinful, but we can still recognize the truth, cooperate with God’s grace, and choose to seek Christ. We need God’s grace to be saved, but we can take the first step toward Christ on our own, apart from grace.” (<https://www.gotquestions.org/semi-Pelagianism.html>)

What does the Bible say about original sin and its affects?

The Corruption of Sin in All People

Genesis 6:5; 8:21

Psalms 51:5

Psalms 58:3

Jeremiah 13:23

Jeremiah 17:9

Romans 3:9-18

Romans 5:12-19

1John 1:8-10

Ephesians 2:1-3

Sinners Inability to Come to God on His Own

Jeremiah 13:23

Romans 8:6-8

1 Corinthians 2:9-15

John 6:35-40, 44, 64

John 8:34

Romans 6:20

2 Corinthians 4:4-6

The New Birth is Necessary and is the Work of God not Man (Monergism)

John 1:11-13

John 3:3-8

Ephesians 2:1-10

James 1:18

1Peter 1:3, 21

Faith and Repentance are the Result of Grace

Acts 16:14; 18:27

2Peter 1:1

Philippians 1:29

Acts 5:30-31; Acts 11:18

2 Timothy 2:25-26

1 Corinthians 4:7

Salvation is the Work of God

Ephesians 1:3-14; 2:49

2 Timothy 1:9

Romans 8:28-39

John 11 - Lazarus' death & resurrection.

John 15:16

John 17:6-9, 20

Acts 13:48

What Do I Love When I Love God?

"But what do I love when I love my God? Not the sweet melody of harmony and song; not the fragrance of flowers, perfumes, and spices; not manna or honey; not limbs such as the body delights to embrace. It is not these that I love when I love my God. And yet, when I love Him, it is true that I love a light of a certain kind, a voice, a perfume, a food, an embrace; but they are of the kind that I love in my inner self, when my soul is bathed in light that is not bound by space; when it listens to sound that never dies away; when it breathes fragrance that is not borne away on the wind; when it tastes food that is never consumed by the eating; when it clings to an embrace from which it is not severed by fulfillment of desire. This is what I love when I love my God."

"But what is my God? I asked this question to the earth. It answered, 'I am not God,' and everything on earth said the same. I asked the sea and the abyss of the deep, and the life forms that creep in them, but they replied, 'We are not your God. Seek what is above us.' So I spoke to the blowing winds, but the entire atmosphere and all that lives in it replied, 'I am not God.' Then I asked the sky, the sun, the moon, the stars; but they told me, 'We are not the God you seek.'" I spoke to everything around me, all that my senses revealed to me, and I said, 'Seeing that you are not my God, tell me about Him. Tell me something of my God!' In a loud clear voice they replied, 'God

is the One who made us.' I put these questions simply by looking on these things, and their beauty was the only answer they gave." **Augustine of Hippo, Confessions, Book 10, chapter 6** (Nedham, 288-89)

Grace and Free-Will

"No-one will say that 'free-will' actually vanished from the human race because of the first man's sin. Yet it is true that sin robbed humankind of 'liberty', the liberty that existed in paradise—that is, the liberty we can define as perfect righteousness with immortality'. That is why human nature stands in need of divine grace. So the Lord says, 'If the Son sets you free, you will be really free' (John 8:36) – free for a good and righteous life. Even so, free-will has not entirely perished from sinners; for free-will is the power by which people commit sin! This is especially the case with all who delight in sinning and love their sin; they choose to do what pleases them. The apostle says, 'When you were the slaves to sin, you were free from righteousness' (Romans 6:20). It is clear that people can become 'slaves of sin' only because they are in fact free; for the thing that makes people 'free from righteousness' is their own sinful free choice! By contrast, however, the only thing that makes people 'free from sin' is the grace of the Saviour. The admirable teacher Paul makes this very distinction: *free* from righteousness (Romans 6:20) – *set free* from sin (6:22). He says 'free' from righteousness, not 'set free' from it; but to prevent his Christian readers from taking any credit to themselves, he does not say they are 'free' from sin, but 'set free' from it. He deliberately uses the phrase 'set free' in harmony with the Lord's statement, 'If the Son sets you free'. For the children of humankind cannot live a good life unless God makes them into His children. How then can Julian of Eclanum try to pretend that the power to live a good life comes from our free-will? Only God's grace gives this power through Jesus Christ our Lord." **Augustine of Hippo, Concerning**

Two Letters of Pelagius, Chapter 1, section 5 (Needham, 289-90)

Christ Chose Us

“You did not choose Me,’ Christ says, ‘but I chose you’ (John 15:16). Such grace is beyond description. What were we, apart from Christ’s choice of us, when we were empty of love? What were we but sinful and lost? We did not lead Him to choose us by believing in Him; for if Christ chose people who already believed, then we chose Him before He chose us. How then could He say, ‘You did not choose Me,’ unless His mercy came before our faith? Here is the faulty reasoning of those who say that God chose us before the creation of the world, not in order to make us good, but because He foreknew that we would be good. This was not the view of Him Who said, ‘You did not choose Me.’ We were not chosen because of our goodness, for we could not be good without being chosen. Grace is no longer grace, if human goodness comes first. Listen, you ungrateful person, listen! ‘You did not choose Me but I chose you.’ Do not say, ‘I am chosen because I first believed.’ If you first believed, you had already chosen Him. But listen: ‘You did not choose Me.’ And do not say, ‘Before I believed, I was already chosen on account of my good works.’ What good work can come before faith when the apostle Paul says, ‘Whatever is not of faith is sin’ (Romans 14:23)? What then shall we say when we hear these words, ‘You did not choose Me’? We shall say this: ‘We were evil and we were chosen that we might become good by the grace of Him who chose us. For salvation is not by grace if our goodness came first; but it is by grace—and therefore God’s grace did not find us good but makes us good.’” **Augustine of Hippo, Commentary of John 15:16** (Needham, 290-91)

Resources:

Sproul, R.C., Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification. Baker Books, 1995.

<https://www.gotquestions.org/semi-Pelagianism.html>

<https://www.gotquestions.org/original-sin.html>

Needham, Nick. *2000 Years of Christ’s Power*, Vol. 1, The Age of the Early Church Fathers, 1st to 6th Century, Christian Focus Publications Ltd. 2016.