

Historical Theology

Pelagianism and Semi-Pelagianism

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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.)

“**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. 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

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

Romans 8:6-8

1 Corinthians 2:9-15

John 6:35-40, 44, 64

John 8:34

2 Corinthians 4:4-6

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

John 1:11-13

John 3:3-8

Ephesians 2:1-10

1Peter 1:3, 21

Faith and Repentance are the Result of Grace

2Peter 1:1

Philippians 1:29

Acts 5:30-31

Salvation is the Work of God

Ephesians 1:3-14

2 Timothy 1:9

Romans 8:28-39

John 11 - Lazarus’ death & resurrection.

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>