

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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<b>Number:</b>	<b>91</b>		Gary L.W. Johnson
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### THE PLAGUE OF PELAGIANISMS

*Heresy* is the ultimate “politically incorrect” word in today’s *postmodern* vortex of sensitivities. The very notion that some cherished belief should be subjected to orthodoxy’s censure is highly offensive. In fact, the whole concept of something actually being heretical is summarily dismissed.<sup>1</sup> The word *heretic* conjures up the image of the Salem Witch Trials with the villainous Puritans gleefully burning harmless “heretics” at the stake for their theological “errors.” What is heresy? Horton helpfully summarizes, “The answer is, any teaching that directly contradicts the clear and direct witness of the Scriptures on a point of salvific importance. In other words, there may be teachings that are strange, such as Benny Hinn’s suggestion that before the Fall, Adam could fly and remain for hours underwater, or teachings that we may regard as clearly contrary to the biblical texts. But since they do not touch upon a key doctrine of God, human nature, Christ’s person and work, the Holy Spirit, or salvation, they may be erroneous, but they are not heretical. For centuries, theologians have distinguished between formal heresy, which is the persistent and stubborn denial of a fundamental doctrine, even though one has been instructed in the truth, and material heresy, in which one embraces a doctrine that is itself heretical, but embraces it in ignorance. The Greek word *hairesis* literally means *that which is chosen by and for oneself*, and Paul employs it concerning false teachers who bring division (1 Cor. 11:19 and Gal. 5:20). In other words, heresy brings with it not only error, but a particular spirit or attitude: arrogance, a rejection of all authority, and self-will. These have always been considered the vices of heresy, but in modern liberalism and Evangelicalism, they are often regarded as signs of special enlightenment or novel insights that have escaped the darkened wits of past generations. Anyone who denies the existence of such a thing as heresy denies the possibility of a religion having any boundaries. If a religion does not have any boundaries, distinguishing Christianity from Hinduism or atheism is meaningless.”<sup>2</sup> Much of the contemporary Evangelicalism is decidedly Pelagian and openly so – as David Wells recently noted.<sup>3</sup> Is Pelagianism a *serious* theological error? Robert Reymond says that Pelagianism constitutes a wholesale rejection of the sum and substance of the Reformation. “Because Pelagianism, in whatever form it takes, is a threat to the *solus Christus, sola gratia, sola fide* principle, claiming as it does that man deserves at least some measure of credit for effecting his salvation, if not in its initiation, at least in his cooperation with initiating grace, the church must ever be on guard to insure that this *solus Christus, sola gratia, sola fide* principle of Holy Scripture remains the sole ultimate ground of salvation.”<sup>4</sup> Pelagianism, as a theological system, derives its name from the fifth-century monk and eunuch named Pelagius. His system of doctrine grew out of a reaction against the teachings of St. Augustine. Pelagius was joined by two other comrades, Caelestius and the cultured Bishop Julian of Eclanum. These men engaged in a bitter and protracted controversy that finally provoked the Council of Carthage in 418, which declared Pelagianism a heresy. Calvin addresses the subject of the Christian’s struggle with sin in his commentary on Romans. This, he declares, is something that can only be said of a regenerate person. “In this man the two objects of Paul’s attention appear more clearly, viz. the great difference which exists between the law of God and the nature of man, and the impossibility of the law of itself producing death. Since carnal man rushes into the lust of sinning with the whole inclination of his mind, he appears to be sinning with as free a choice as if it were in his power to govern himself. This most pernicious opinion has been almost universally accepted – that man by his own natural powers can choose either course he pleases without the assistance

of divine grace. But while the will of the believer is driven to good by the Spirit of God, the depravity of the nature which obstinately resists and strives against what is opposed to it, appears in him conspicuously. A regenerate man, therefore, affords the most suitable example to acquaint us with the extent of the disagreement between our nature and the righteousness of the law. His example also provides a more appropriate proof of the other clause than the mere consideration of human nature. The law, because it produces only death in the man who is wholly carnal, is more easily accused in that regard, since the source of the evil is doubtful. In a regenerate man the law produces wholesome fruits. This proves that it is the flesh alone which prevents the law from giving life. The law is far from producing death by itself. For the purpose, therefore, of understanding the whole of this argument with more certainty and fidelity, it should be noted that this conflict mentioned by the apostle does not exist in man until he has been sanctified by the Spirit of God. When man is left to his own nature, he is completely borne away by his lust without any resistance. Although the ungodly are tormented by the strings of conscience, and cannot take such delight in their vices without having some taste of bitterness, yet we cannot deduce from this either that they hate evil or love good. The Lord thus permits them to endure such torments, in order to reveal his judgment to them in some way, but not to move them either with a love of righteousness or with a hatred of sin. There is, therefore, this difference between them and believers. Believers are never so blinded and hardened in their minds as not to condemn their crimes when they are reminded of them in the judgment of their own conscience. Understanding is not utterly extinguished in them, but they retain a distinction between right and wrong. Sometimes, also, they are struck with horror on account of a sense of their sin, so that they bear a kind of condemnation even in this life. Nevertheless they approve of sin with all their heart, and therefore yield to it without any feeling of genuine repugnance. The stings of conscience by which they are afflicted proceed from a contradiction of judgment, rather than from the contrary affection of the will. Among the godly, on the other hand, the regeneration of God has been begun. They are so divided, however, that although they aspire to God with the special desire of their hearts, seek heavenly righteousness, and hate sin, they are drawn back again to the earth by the remnants of their flesh. Accordingly, in this state of distraction, they fight against their own nature and feel their own nature fighting against them. They condemn their sins, not only because they are compelled by the judgment of reason, but because they abhor them with genuine feeling of the heart and detest their conduct in committing sin. This is the Christian warfare between flesh and spirit, of which Paul speaks in Gal. 5:17. It has, therefore, been well said that the carnal man plunges into sin with the consent and concurrence of his whole soul, but that a division at once begins as soon as he is called by the Lord and renewed by the Spirit. Regeneration only begins in this life. The remnants of the flesh that remain always follow their corrupt affections, and thus arouse the struggle against the Spirit.”<sup>5</sup>

I. ***PELAGIANISM TEACHES:***

1. Human nature, which is good, is not convertible. It is indestructibly good.
2. Free choice is “nothing but a movement of the mind without any compulsion.”
3. Guided by reason, man can achieve righteousness.
4. A sin nature cannot be inherited.
5. Man can achieve sinlessness *easily*.
6. Natural death is not a consequence of the Fall.
7. Adam’s guilt was not transmitted to the human race. His sin affected himself alone.
8. Grace facilitates goodness, but is not necessary for its achievement.
9. Grace is merely illumination and construction.
10. Christ works by His *example*.

II. ***AUGUSTINIANISM TEACHES:***

1. Mankind is a “mass of sin” (*massa perditionis*), incapable of raising itself to the good.
2. Men are saved because God predestinates, calls, justifies, sanctifies, and preserves them.
3. Faith is a gift of God (regeneration precedes faith).

4. Sin is a *state* as well as an act.
5. Men are in bondage to sin, morally unable to choose Christ. The will is intact after the Fall, but inclines only to sin.
6. Adam's sin results in the fallenness of the human race.
7. Man cannot obey God without the grace of divine assistance. No fallen creature can achieve perfection.
8. Natural death is a consequence of Adam's fall.
9. Justification is a work of divine grace.
10. Christ effects a real atonement as our means of salvation.

We can easily see how disparate are the views of Pelagianism and Augustinianism. There was no individual in antiquity named "Semi" Pelagius. Semi-Pelagianism derives not from a single historical person, but from a multitude of historical attempts to find a middle ground, a compromise position between Pelagianism and Augustinianism.

### III. ***SEMI-PELAGIANISM TEACHES:***

1. Human nature is fallen, but not totally: Man still has an island of righteousness intact by which he can, under his own power, choose righteousness.
2. The power of man to choose goodness is weakened by the Fall, but not destroyed. Man is not dead in sin, but severely ill. The flesh can profit something, though it requires some assistance from grace.
3. Grace is necessary for salvation, but man must, by his own power, avail himself of grace by cooperating with and assenting to it.
4. Faith is not a gift of God, but the result of a human choice or decision.
5. God does not actually predestinate individuals to salvation unconditionally. Rather, God knows in advance who will, by their own power, choose Christ and chooses them to salvation. God knows that certain persons will accept grace and elects them on the basis of that condition.
6. The grace of regeneration can be refused and rendered ineffectual by the power of human choice.
7. Grace is chiefly *external* to man leaving man's conversion ultimately to man.
8. Natural death is a consequence of Adam's sin (but spiritual death is not).
9. Justification rests ultimately on man's decision.
10. The Atonement is an objective event, which must be appropriated by man before it is effectual. The atonement of Christ accomplishes no one's salvation absolutely but everyone's salvation *potentially*.

But the matter does end here, as Warfield long ago noted, "the price of liberty is eternal vigilance, so the Church soon found that religion itself can be retained only at the cost of perpetual struggle. Pelagianism died hard; or rather it did not die at all, but only retired more or less out of sight and bided its time; meanwhile vexing the Church with modified forms of itself, modified just enough to escape the letter of the Church's condemnation. Into the place of Pelagianism there stepped at once Semi-Pelagianism; and when the controversy with Semi-Pelagianism had been fought and won, into the place of Semi-Pelagianism there stepped that semi-semi-Pelagianism which the Council of Orange betrayed the Church into, the genius of an Aquinas systematized for her, and the Council of Trent finally fastened with rivets of iron upon that portion of the church which obeyed it. The necessity of grace had been acknowledged as the result of the Pelagian controversy; its preveniency, as the result of the Semi-Pelagian controversy; but its certain efficacy, its *irresistibility* men call it, was by the fatal compromise of Orange denied, and thus the conquering march of Augustinianism was checked and the pure confession of salvation by grace alone made forever impossible within that section of the Church whose proud boast is that it is *semper eadem*. It was no longer legally possible, indeed, within the limits of the Church, to ascribe to man, with the Pelagian, the whole of salvation; nor even, with the Semi-Pelagian, the initiation of salvation. But

neither was it any longer legally possible to ascribe salvation so entirely to the grace of God that it could complete itself without the aid of the discredited human will – its aid only as empowered and moved by prevenient grace indeed, but not effectually moved, so that it could not hold back and defeat the operations of saving grace.”<sup>6</sup>

**CONCLUSION:** “We all have *fibra Pelagiana* in us,” said the Puritan divine Thomas Goodwin, “we are naturally all Pelagians.”<sup>7</sup> Recently a Christian newspaper published locally for the Phoenix area carried an editorial entitled “Free Will, Predestination” by a local minister named Brandon Gunderson, who quickly revealed how little he knew about Calvinism, church history, and the Scriptures. Here are some of his erroneous observations: “What I like to call radical predestination, originated in the teachings of a scholar by the name of John Calvin. This branch of theology was birthed in what we call reformed Christianity. According to Calvin, the absolute sovereignty of God gave human beings no choice in salvation. Therefore, God predetermined or micro-managed man’s destiny. In other words, you were born either damned to hell or destined to go to heaven . . . The word of God teaches that salvation is an inheritance that is achieved by the combining efforts of God (who already took initiative) and man’s response, being the determining factor.”<sup>8</sup> This is pure Semi-Pelagianism. Note that according to Gunderson, the *determining factor* is the creature’s free-will. This is no gospel. This Pelagianizing exaltation of human ability Luther called “the heresy of heresies.”<sup>9</sup> The great Reformer appeals to Paul’s argument in Romans 7 in particular to refute *any* notion of an unfettered free will. “I forbear to insist on the Achilles of my arguments, which the Diatribe proudly passes by without notice – I mean, Paul’s teaching in Rom. 7 and Gal. 5, that there is in the saints and the godly such a mighty warfare between the Spirit and the flesh that they cannot do what they would. From this I would argue as follows: If human nature is so bad that in those who are born again of the Spirit it not only fails to endeavour after good, but actually fights against and opposes good, how could it endeavour after good in those who are not yet born again of the Spirit, but serve under Satan in the old man? And Paul is not here speaking of gross affections only (which is the universal expedient by which the Diatribe regularly parries the thrust of every Scripture); but he lists among the works of the flesh heresy, idolatry, contentions, divisions, etc., which reign in what you call the most exalted faculties, that is, reason and will. If, now, the flesh with these affections wars against the Spirit in the saints, much more will it war against God in the ungodly and in their *free will*! Hence in Rom. 8 he calls it *enmity against God* (v. 7). May I say that I should be interested to see *this* argument punctured, and *free will* safeguarded from its attack!” He goes on to add, “I frankly confess that, for myself, even if it could be, I should not want *free will* to be given me, nor anything to be left in my own hands to enable me to endeavour after salvation; not merely because in face of so many dangers, and adversities, or devils, I should still be forced to labour with no guarantee of success, and to beat my fists at the air. If I lived and worked to all eternity, my conscience would never reach comfortable certainty as to how much it must do to satisfy God.”<sup>10</sup>

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> This was expressed forthrightly some years ago by the noted Liberal Theologian James Barr (who had been a professing Evangelical), who declared, “Personally, I believe that the concept of heresy has ceased to be functionally useful for the evaluation of present-day theological opinions. When we say that this or that is heretical, all we are saying is that, in those

days in which there was such a thing as heresy, when heresy was a useful functioning concept, this opinion would then have been heretical.” In *Fundamentalism* (The Westminster Press, 1978), p. 197.

<sup>2</sup>M. Horton, *Modern Reformation* (Jan/Feb, 1994), p. 4.

<sup>3</sup>He writes, “Given the kind of airy indifference to the place of biblical doctrine in the seeker methodologies, it is probably futile to suggest that there is, in fact, a doctrinal reason for this convergence between the seeker churches and the older liberalism. That explanation lies in the fact that there is a disconnect between the biblical orthodoxy which is professed and the assumptions off which seeker churches are building themselves. Seeker methodology rests upon the Pelagian view that human beings are not inherently sinful, despite creedal affirmations to the contrary, that in their disposition to God and His Word postmoderns are neutral, that they can be seduced into making the purchase of faith even as they can into making any other kind of purchase. A majority of 52% of Evangelicals, it was noted earlier, 52% reject the idea of original sin. It would nevertheless be quite foolish to think that using what was once a dreaded word – Pelagian – to describe all of this would create dismay. It will not. The majority of Evangelicals are deliberately undocctrinal.” *Above All Earthly Pow’rs: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Eerdmans, 2005), p. 299.

<sup>4</sup>R. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of The Christian Faith* (Nelson, 1998), p. 470. Brian McLaren, the leading voice in the Emergent Church, reveals much of his own Pelagian colors in a misguided attempt to extend the boundaries of orthodoxy as wide as possible. He jettisons not only Calvinism’s TULIP, but the Solas of the Reformation as well, contending that this is a form of “reductionism!” Cf. his *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Zondervan, 2004), p. 198. McLaren’s “orthodoxy” is defined by his own theological roots in the Anabaptist tradition, particularly in its categorical rejection of the theology of the Reformers.

<sup>5</sup>John Calvin, *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle To The Romans*, trans. R. Mackenzie, ed. D. W. Torrance and T. F. Torrance (Eerdmans, 1961), p. 148.

<sup>6</sup>B. B. Warfield, *The Plan of Salvation* (rpt. Eerdmans, 1970), p. 36.

<sup>7</sup>*The Works of Thomas Goodwin VI* (rpt. Tanski, 2000), p. 248.

<sup>8</sup>*Arizona Christian News* (Dec., 2005, vol. VIII, edition 12), p. 17.

<sup>9</sup>*The Bondage of the Will* translated by J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnson (Revell, 1957). Luther’s book was a response to the acclaimed humanist scholar Erasmus, who at the urging of many in the Church of Rome, wrote his *Diatribes Concerning Free-Will*, which was constituted a frontal attack on Luther’s theology.

<sup>10</sup>As cited by Warfield, op. cit., p. 50.