

What is Pelagianism?

Pelagius was a British Celtic monk who lived in the 5th Century; a lawyer who taught his doctrinal errors and asceticism in Rome about 383-410. For him grace was an innate ability to do good, the encouragement of scripture and Christ and forgiveness of sins. The attack of the Goths on Rome dispersed Pelagius and his followers, many settling in Africa to trouble churches near Augustine. Pelagius then moved to Palestine. He was confronted by Augustine of Hippo regarding the claim of natural man's ability to be free from sin.

Pelagian teaching: Pelagius denied total depravity, election, the imputation of Adam's guilt, the need of redemption, and upheld that man has the power to save himself through good works. In his theology sin is minimised and free will is sufficient for salvation, aided by the law and the example of Christ. Pelagianism is opposed to the sovereignty of God and all the Doctrines of Grace. In essence he taught that man's nature was not totally depraved but innocent and man could use his free will to choose holiness. If man is responsible, he must be able; he can choose good and perform it. There is a limited gracious influence given to those who deserve it by good use of free will. Sin only arises when we deliberately choose evil; thus a person can live free of sin even without knowing Jesus Christ if their will is strong enough.

Pelagianism contradicts many vital Christian doctrines, especially that man is born in sin, is dead in sin and cannot be saved without a prior working of God to graciously give faith and repentance. It was the strongest teaching that contended against the sovereignty of God in salvation and was strenuously countered by Augustine of Hippo and formally condemned by the church.

Pelagius could not see that God wills the impossible – he commands faith and repentance of all men - but only gives the power to obey to the elect. Pelagius claimed that all men can obey naturally and do good without divine aid. Some supposedly Christian teachers became virtual Pelagians, such as CG Finney.

A softening of some aspects of Pelagianism (and a reaction against Augustinianism) is found in forms of Semi-Pelagianism, which basically teaches that man co-operates with God in salvation by doing his part to initiate it (free-will initiates grace). He can't be righteous without divine salvation but decides to accept what God offers in the Gospel (i.e. grace mingled with human works). Thus the sovereignty lies with man not God. Roman Catholicism gradually became Semi-Pelagian and Arminianism is also a Semi-Pelagian system.

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