

In the first century the apostles of Christ founded churches throughout the Roman world. In preparation for their passing they warned the young believers with tears to beware lest they be found unfaithful in the coming days of temptation. The church faced heavy persecution from the Jewish religious establishment, which would be later succeeded and exceeded by the mighty emperors of Rome who vexed the bride of Christ with all the fury they could muster. Yet the apostles had carefully warned the Church to beware not only of outside threats, but of the wolves within. Even before the New Testament writings were completed the spirit of antichrist raised its deceptive specter in the teachings of the Judaizers and early Gnostics. Jude and John knew that these would only be the beginning. Barely two hundred years after the deaths of the apostles the Arian heresy appeared, claiming that Christ was something less than the true and eternal God. God raised up mighty men such as Athanasius and Basil of Caesarea to oppose them. These men were convinced that only one who is fully God could bear the wrath of almighty God to expiate the sins of men, or rise again to make intercession for his people. The identity of Christ as the God-man, the one Mediator between God and men and only Savior of the world was thus established in the Church as an incontrovertible test of orthodoxy by the close of the fourth century. One would be tempted to think that the Christian Church could rest at ease on the firm foundational doctrine of Christ the Mediator, which had been so ably summarized in the creeds of Nicaea and Constantinople, having beaten back all of the antichristian doctrines which denied Christ. But Satan had more tricks up his sleeve. No sooner was the doctrine of Christ's nature and identity established by the great ecumenical creeds of the Church than false teachers

appeared who, though they held to Nicene orthodoxy, put in question the necessity and sufficiency of the redemption that Christ wrought in his mediatorial work of salvation.

Pelagius was born in the late fourth century in Britain according to the most reliable sources, although there has been some speculation that he may have come originally from Ireland<sup>1</sup>. Very little is known of the details of Pelagius' youth<sup>2</sup>. He was a monastic layman and began to gain influence as a teacher in Rome<sup>3</sup>. Most of what we know about Pelagius comes from the controversy surrounding his doctrine. Pelagius exhorted Christians to live lives in accordance with the gospel by dedicating themselves to God and putting off the sins of the flesh<sup>4</sup>. He emphasized the responsibility that each person individually bears before God to keep his commandments in imitation of Christ, and the pending judgment that would show whether each man was worthy of eternal life<sup>5</sup>. Pelagius praised God for his grace in creation by which he gave to every man the free will and ability to do what is good<sup>6</sup>. He believed that each man had the liberty and ability to do works which were pleasing to God, could keep from sinning, and could merit salvation<sup>7</sup>. He did not however, believe that the first sin of the first humans, Adam and Eve, had significantly altered the disposition or will of man in such a way as to make it incapable of doing good. In fact, Pelagius taught that the human condition was essentially the same as it had been before the sin of Adam<sup>8</sup>. In this he was influenced by

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<sup>1</sup> John Ferguson, *Pelagius*, (Cambridge: W. Heffer & Sons Ltd., 1956), 39.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 43.

<sup>4</sup> B. R. Reese, *Pelagius: A Reluctant Heretic*, (Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1988), 1.

<sup>5</sup> Pelagius, "On the Possibility of Not Sinning", *The Letters of Pelagius and His Followers*, B. R. Reese, ed., (Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1991), 167.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., "To Demetrias", 39.

<sup>7</sup> Jerome, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series 1, Vol 6, Philip Schaff, ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans), 452.; Pelagius, "To Demetrias", *Letters*, 46.

<sup>8</sup> "On Bad Teachers", *Letters*, 245.

Greek philosophy, especially that of the stoics. Pelagius believed that man was by nature capable of refraining from sin, and that he did not inherit sin by nature. To Pelagius, sin was not a contagion or genetic defect passed on through procreation, but rather certain rebellious human choices not in accordance with God's law, that humans kept doing not of any natural necessity but by imitating one another. Each generation sinned because it imitated the behavior of those who had come before. Pelagius feared that an over-stating of the sinful condition would detract from man's responsibility to keep God's commandments and impinge the justice of God by making him out to be a punisher of sinners for sins which they could not help but commit<sup>9</sup>. He looked upon the death of Christ as primarily a supreme example to follow of self-sacrifice, humility, and love<sup>10</sup>.

Pelagius' followers were enthusiastic and zealous in their message of holiness and repentance<sup>11</sup>. Eschewing the sins of the flesh and the works of the devil, they gained a reputation throughout the Roman Empire for teaching Christian perfectionism--that Christians may attain to a level of sinlessness in this life. They reasoned that God would not command men to keep what was impossible for them to keep, contending that it would be both illogical and unjust for him to do so<sup>12</sup>. They argued that God had created man with sufficient grace to do what is good and holy<sup>13</sup>. They denied that the good works of saints were supported and enabled by a continuous issue of grace by the Holy Spirit indwelling the believer, as the orthodox taught<sup>14</sup>. Just as the Pelagians thought it would

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Augustine, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series 1, Vol 5, Philip Schaff, ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans), 376.

<sup>9</sup> Jerome, 450.

<sup>10</sup> Augustine, 214.; Pelagius, "On Bad Teachers", *Letters*, 243.

<sup>11</sup> "To a Lapsed Penitent", *Letters*, 333.

<sup>12</sup> Jerome, 452.; Pelagius, "On the Possibility of Not Sinning", *Letters*, 167.

<sup>13</sup> Jerome, 450.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 473.

be unjust for God to punish men for sins they could not help but commit, they also saw injustice in the idea that God rewards saints for good works that the Spirit himself performs through them by grace<sup>15</sup>. In that case God would simply be rewarding himself, which to them made no sense and maligned his justice. They maintained that men sinned only by their own free choice. Pelagians accused the orthodox of making God the author of sin by their understanding of God's sovereignty<sup>16</sup>. When asked why it is that saints continue to sin, they responded that in that case those saints' choice not to sin was imperfect<sup>17</sup>, in other words that they were not fully resolved not to sin. However, according to the Pelagius, it was possible for saints to attain to a level of resolution not to sin through self-denial and will-power.

The Pelagian teachings stirred up no small controversy in the fifth-century Church. Such venerable divines as Jerome and Augustine of Hippo were compelled to respond to their doctrine<sup>18</sup>. Both of these eminent doctors opposed Pelagianism on grounds that it denied the efficacious grace of God which did not end at creation but continues throughout the lives of the saints, enabling them “both to will and to do of his good pleasure<sup>19</sup>.” Jerome and Augustine challenged the Pelagians to point out one human being other than Christ who had lived without sin<sup>20</sup>, quoting the apostolic admonition that “if we claim to be without sin we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us<sup>21</sup>.” Jerome pointed out that even great saints such as David and Paul were conscious of their own

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 450.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 474.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 452.

<sup>18</sup> Reese, *Pelagius*, 21.

<sup>19</sup> *The Holy Bible*, Philippians 2.13.

<sup>20</sup> Jerome, 470.; Augustine, 386.

<sup>21</sup> *The Holy Bible*, 1 John 1.8.

sin<sup>22</sup>. Augustine taught that every man born into the world inherited sin from his parents by natural propagation<sup>23</sup>. He argued that the saints are not fully perfected in this life, but are called righteous in Scripture because of their faith in Christ<sup>24</sup>. He with Jerome asserted that in this process of sanctification, which always remains incomplete in this life, the saints depend not only on the gifts that God gave them at creation, but also on the sovereign, continual, and efficacious grace of God to sustain and induce every good work that they do<sup>25</sup>. Augustine affirmed that all saints, even the saints of the Old Testament, were redeemed in Christ<sup>26</sup>, not saved by works of the law.

In 415 A. D., Orosius, a pupil of Augustine, submitted accusations against Pelagius to Bishop John of Jerusalem<sup>27</sup>. In July of that year Pelagius appeared before a judicial council in Jerusalem to respond to the charge of heresy<sup>28</sup>. This presbytery deferred the question to the Latin churches, since both the accused and the accusers were of the Latin west. Yet later that year two bishops from Gaul brought the matter before Bishop Eulogius of Caesarea. In December Pelagius appeared before a synod of fourteen bishops in Diospolis<sup>29</sup>. Responding to the charge that he supposed man could attain to sinlessness by free will alone, Pelagius said that man requires the grace of God to reach perfection. Yet Pelagius carefully guarded his words, never mentioning that by this “grace of God” he meant only the gifts that God had given man at creation and not a continuing assistance of the Spirit<sup>30</sup>. Thus deceived, the synod exonerated Pelagius of the

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<sup>22</sup> Jerome, 466, 470.

<sup>23</sup> Augustine, 415.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 409.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 378.; Jerome, 473.

<sup>26</sup> Augustine, 380.

<sup>27</sup> Philip Schaff, ed., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series 1, Vol 5, online, www.ccel.org, 179.

<sup>28</sup> Augustine, 179.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Jerome, 450.

charge of heresy. In response to this development, the bishops of North Africa, including Augustine, appealed to Bishop Innocent I of Rome asking him to examine the matter. Pelagius also appealed to the Bishop of Rome, but Innocent I passed away in the meantime, and so the new Bishop Zosimus examined his case<sup>31</sup>. Caelestius, a prominent pupil of Pelagius, presented a detailed confession of faith to the Roman Bishop in 417 in defense of Pelagian teachings. Zosimus determined that the previous councils in Palestine and Caesarea had not sufficiently examined or understood the Pelagian doctrines, and urged the African bishops to convene a synod to decide the matter<sup>32</sup>. In May, 418, a synod of 200 bishops which met in Carthage condemned Pelagianism as heresy<sup>33</sup>. Just prior, on 30 April Emperor Honorius had banished all Pelagians from the cities of Italy<sup>34</sup>. The case of Pelagius had been decided, but the Pelagian denial of man's original sin and God's sovereign grace in salvation would yet rise again to trouble the Church in century after century.

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<sup>31</sup> Augustine, 239.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ferguson, 111.; Reese, *Pelagius*, 64.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

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The Pelagian controversy, like those which troubled the church before Pelagius' time, serves as a warning to the Church in all ages that she must follow the example of the Fathers by zealously guarding the pure apostolic doctrine from false teachers that will continue to arise from within the Church. When the Enemy cannot assault the flock from without, he attacks from within. The Church's doctrine develops in response to heresy. While she may never teach anything but what is revealed in Scripture, her own understanding, differentiation, and clear definition of biblical doctrine must progress in response to all the new and creative ways that false teachers invent to deny Christ the only Savior while yet affirming the accepted creeds of the Church. It is imperative therefore that the Church never relax her confessional standards or soften her stance on biblical doctrines that have historically been recognized in her courts, but, in response to the spirit of antichrist in her midst, that she instead move forward in each generation to build upon the ground laid by her fathers in the faith. The tendency to downplay the sinfulness of fallen man and to pit human responsibility against God's sovereignty in the salvation of men has come back from the pit again and again since Pelagius' time. The Jesuits, Arminians, Socinians, Wesleyans, Mormons, Cambellites, and "New Schoolers", while not fully endorsing all of the Pelagian language, have each in turn found subtle ways to mitigate the lost human condition and deny Christ's work as both the author and finisher of our salvation. The arguments these movements have raised against the total inability of fallen man to contribute to his own salvation and the absolute sovereignty of God over all creation are exactly the same arguments that Pelagius and his followers articulated in the fifth century in opposition to the orthodox teaching. Vigilance is not an option. It is now more critical than ever that the Church of Christ oppose any such heresy



that exalts itself against the glory of Christ in his person and work as Mediator with no less vigor than that displayed by God's servants Augustine and Jerome. Her survival depends on it.