

Original Humanism

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Pelagius was an ascetic monk from England who traveled to Rome about 380 AD to write about and teach his ascetic practices. In Rome, Pelagius was appalled at the immoral lifestyle of Roman society. He began to blame this immorality of Christians on the theology of divine grace that was being preached by most theologians including Augustine. In reaction to their emphasis on the sovereignty of God, and de-emphasis of the free will of man, Pelagius began developing a theology that emphasized the part of man in salvation along with man's further responsibility to live a perfect life, and de-emphasized the role of God. His argument was that all people are born perfect, and are expected by God to live godly (perfect) lives. God would not give us commands that we could not keep. God would not give us commands that He did not expect us to keep.

To his credit, Pelagius had an excellent reputation in Rome, and all the leaders of the church referred to him as a "saintly man". He definitely "walked the walk". Around 405 AD, Pelagius began to "take on" the leading theologians of that day, and notably Jerome and Augustine. When Rome was attacked by the Visigoths in 410, Pelagius moved to Carthage in northern Africa.

This Town's not Big Enough for the Two of Us

Augustine spent a lot of time in Carthage, and was the Bishop of the nearby church at Hippo. Pelagius and Augustine had several unpleasant encounters which led to a flurry of writing against each other as well as a series of Church Councils to decide between them. Augustine prevailed, and Pelagius moved to Palestine where he felt his views would be better received, but he encountered the famous Bishop of that area, Jerome, who was famous for translating the Bible into Latin. Augustine had sent his spokesman, Orosius, to Palestine to speak against Pelagius there which persuaded Jerome to oppose Pelagius. John of Jerusalem called a church council there to try Pelagius for heresy in 415, but the council rendered no verdict and passed the controversy to the Latin Church (Rome). In 417, Innocent, the bishop of Rome, condemned Pelagius. In 418 the African bishops condemned Pelagius, and in 431, Pelagius was condemned universally by all the church.

The Humanistic Opinions of Pelagius

Even though Pelagius was "run out of town", so to speak, by his contemporaries, in the next generation his ideas were accepted by the Eastern Church in Asia Minor and Greece. Even in the western Roman Catholic Church his ideas had a great impact in years to come, especially in the middle ages. Most people think Pelagius was just a proponent of free will, but that was just a by-product of his core issues. His foundational beliefs began with the nature of man. He believed that Adam's sin had nothing to do with us, and that all men are born perfect and without sin. Man has the ability on his own to work out his own salvation, and it is certainly possible to live a perfect godly life. The idea of free will to obey or disobey God and God's Law arises out of his view of human nature. Pelagius was definitely an optimist about the nature of man and man's future on planet earth.

The scariest assumption that arises out of Pelagius' beliefs is his denial of God's unmerited, unassisted grace. Since we are born without sin, and free to choose to obey God perfectly without any assistance, the responsibility is all ours. To Pelagius, the grace of God refers to the free will God created us with to do good from our own power, without divine aid. The further grace of God was to give us Jesus' teachings and perfect example. Therefore, Pelagius found no need for the enabling power of the Holy Spirit. The Christian life to him was very much like the Stoic philosophy of ascetic self-control.

In studying the life and background of Pelagius and Augustine, we find a marked contrast of upbringing and experiences. Augustine was brought up in an immoral Roman world while Pelagius seems to have come from a more rural, quiet, religious background. Augustine was a man of admitted great sexual passions, while Pelagius seemed to have no problem controlling his desires. In reviewing his life, Augustine was certain that life was made up of a continuous series of selfish choices, but like the Apostle Paul, he had been apprehended by the grace of God. Pelagius claimed to have always lived a quiet pious life of self control. No doubt each man's teachings were shaped by his experiences.

By all accounts, Pelagius lived a good moral life, and was very sincere about his beliefs. Nevertheless, to quote Paul in Romans 10:2, "they have a zeal for God, but not according to the truth. For being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness (in the atoning work of Christ on the cross). For Christ is the end of seeking righteousness through the law to everyone who believes." Pelagius only seemed to be righteous to his peers because compared to them he was righteous, but the Scriptures clearly reveal that we are not judged by the relative righteousness of man, but we are compared to the righteousness of God. Paul said it well in Romans 3:23, "for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God". Paul had already established in Romans 3:9-12 that compared to God, both Jews and Greeks are all under sin...There is none righteous, not even one."

Why do so many people like Pelagius fail to recognize their own fallen human nature? It makes me want to call his college roommate, or give his wife truth serum to find out his faults. I think the answer is very much the same as why doesn't a fish know that it is wet? The fish doesn't know because it is immersed in water, it is all it knows. I read about a poll given to find out if mankind were naturally liars. In the poll, 90% admitted to lying from time to time, and the other 10% were found to be lying. It is also safe to assume that Pelagius was only concerned about external actions and not the condition of his inner person. If we were able to put a screen above his head with all his thoughts, daydreams, fantasies, and immediate reaction to insults printed out---can you imagine what we would see? In reviewing the descriptions of Pelagius' testimony at his trial in Palestine, it is clear to me that he cleverly designed his answers to avoid being found guilty. Men call this acting shrewdly, but God calls it lying.

Compare Pelagius to the Pharisees

In Jesus' famous Sermon on the Mount, He did a great job of roasting the Pharisees, who would be considered the premier teachers of religion, the Mosaic Law, and the traditions that shaped the culture of first century Judaism during Christ's ministry. Like Pelagius who came along over 300 years later, they believed that they were righteous and that they had the ability to keep the law. Jesus told a parable to the Pharisees that illustrated the fallacy of this in Luke 18:9-14. Jesus said the Pharisees "trusted in themselves that they were righteous". In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told the crowd that "unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven." Jesus then proceeded to give six illustrations of how the Pharisees actually broke the law in Matthew 5:20-48. In fairness to Pelagius, I would say that the chief difference between Pelagius and the Pharisees was that he was not the hypocrite that the Pharisees were. In Matt. 6:1-18, Jesus established their hypocrisy in the area of giving, prayer, and fasting.

False Teachers in Galatia and Colossae

The Apostle Paul wrote two letters that we have in the New Testament that were primarily written to warn about the dangers of false teachers within the churches in Galatia and the church in Colossae. The false teachers in Galatia were very much like the Pharisees in that they seem to be Jewish and their teaching concerned keeping the law in order to be saved. They had taken the Gospel of Jesus and added the necessity of obedience to law. Paul strongly warned the Galatians, "if any man is preaching to you a gospel that is different to that which you originally received (from Paul), let him be accursed." In Gal.3:11, Paul went on to say "Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident; for 'The righteous man shall live by faith.'"

The false teachers in Colossae were apparently from a background that mixed Greek philosophy with Judaistic legalism. In that letter Paul warned against basing their salvation or spiritual life on the philosophy of man, mysticism, laws of man, or ascetic practices; all of which have the appearance of wisdom, but are actually just "self made religion" (Col.2:8-23). Instead, Paul wrote that Jesus Christ is above all these practices of men. Jesus is pre-eminent to all of man's wisdom and religion for "in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority." (Col.2:9-10).

Conclusion

We could go on to analyze the false teachers in Peter's second epistle or John's epistles, but what is clear in all the New Testament is that people have always desired to accomplish their own salvation and continue to do so today, it is part of the vanity of mankind. We can only be saved by the grace of God, and that can only be received by faith. The good works and obedience that we necessarily do, come as a result of being saved. A saving faith in the atoning work of Christ will produce changes in us that will in time burst forth in fruit, yet as in our initial salvation and eventual glorification, it will all be an occasion for GLORIFYING GOD only.

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