

## **PELAGIUS**

### **DEFENSE OF THE FREEDOM OF THE WILL**

Reconstructed by Rev. Daniel R. Jennings

**Synopsis:** This book was written by Pelagius and explains his beliefs regarding the free will that God has given to mankind. It was a short treatise composed of four books.

These fragments are taken from Augustine's two book work entitled "On the Grace of Christ, and on Original Sin". Unfortunately for those wishing to fully understand Pelagius' views Augustine is not a faithful quoter when it comes to his archenemy's writings. Augustine will quote him in one place, then repeat the quote later in a different way, each time wording it in such a way that best suits his argument. We are left to wonder if he has done this with all of the quotations that he has made from Pelagius' writings, perhaps exaggerating his statements to present them in an extreme light that the original author never meant. This would explain why two ecclesiastical synods, two popes, at least thirty-two bishops and several influential Christians could not find anything wrong with Pelagius' doctrinal stances.

"Now we have implanted in us by God a capacity for either part. It resembles, as I may say, a fruitful and fecund root which yields and produces diversely according to the will of man, and which is capable, at the planter's own choice, of either shedding a beautiful bloom of virtues, or of bristling with the thorny thickets of vices." (from Book 1)

"We distinguish three things, arranging them in a certain graduated order. We put in the first place 'ability;' in the second, 'volition;' and in the third, 'actuality.' The 'ability' we place in our nature, the 'volition' in our will, and the 'actuality' in the effect. The first, that is, the 'ability,' properly belongs to God, who has bestowed it on His creature; the other two, that is, the 'volition' and the 'actuality,' must be referred to man, because they flow forth from the fountain of the will. For his willing, therefore, and doing a good work, the praise belongs to man; or rather both to man, and to God who has bestowed on him the 'capacity' for his will and work, and who evermore by the help of His grace assists even this capacity. That a man is able to will and effect any good work, comes from God alone. So that this one faculty can exist, even when the other two have no being; but these latter cannot exist without that former one. I am therefore free not to have either a good volition or action; but I am by no means able not to have the capacity of good. This capacity is inherent in me, whether I will or no; nor does nature at any time receive in this point freedom for itself. Now the meaning of all this will be rendered clearer by an example or two. That we are able to see with our eyes is not of us; but it is our own that we make a good or a bad use of our eyes. So again (that I may, by applying a general case in illustration, embrace all), that we are able to do, say, think, any good thing, comes from Him who has endowed us with this 'ability,' and who also assists this 'ability;' but that we really do a good thing, or speak a good word, or think a good thought, proceeds from our own selves, because we are also able to turn all these into evil. Accordingly,-- and this is a point which needs frequent repetition, because of your calumny of us,-- whenever we say that a man can live without sin, we also give praise to God by our acknowledgment of the capacity which we have received from Him, who has bestowed such 'ability' upon us; and there is here no occasion for praising the human agent, since it

is God's matter alone that is for the moment treated of; for the question is not about 'willing,' or 'effecting,' but simply and solely about that which may possibly be." (from Book 3)

"We are supposed by very ignorant persons to do wrong in this matter to divine grace, because we say that it by no means perfects sanctity in us without our will,--as if God could have imposed any command on His grace, without also supplying the help of His grace to those on whom he imposed His commands, so that men might more easily accomplish through grace what they are required to do by their free will. And this grace we for our part do not, as you suppose, allow to consist merely in the law, but also in the help of God. God helps us by His teaching and revelation, whilst He opens the eyes of our heart; whilst He points out to us the future, that we may not be absorbed in the present; whilst He discovers to us the snares of the devil; whilst He enlightens us with the manifold and ineffable gift of heavenly grace. Does the man who says all this appear to you to be a denier of grace? Does he not acknowledge both man's free will and God's grace?"

"How will this stand consistently with the apostle's words, 'It is God that worketh in you both to will and to perfect'? He works in us to will what is good, to will what is holy, when He rouses us from our devotion to earthly desires, and from our love of the present only, after the manner of brute animals, by the magnitude of the future glory and the promise of its rewards; when by revealing wisdom to us He stirs up our sluggish will to a longing after God; when (what you are not afraid to deny in another passage) he persuades us to everything which is good."

"[James tells us 'Submit yourselves unto God; but resist the devil, and he will flee from you.'] He shows us [here] how we ought to resist the devil, if we submit ourselves indeed to God and by doing His will merit His divine grace, and by the help of the Holy Ghost more easily withstand the evil spirit."

"The man who hastens to the Lord, and desires to be directed by Him, that is, who makes his own will depend upon God's, who moreover cleaves so closely to the Lord as to become (as the apostle says) 'one spirit' with Him, does all this by nothing else than by his freedom of will."

"Whosoever makes a right use of this [freedom of the will] does so entirely surrender himself to God, and does so completely mortify his own will, that he is able to say with the apostle, 'Nevertheless it is already of I that live, but Christ liveth in me;' and 'He placeth his heart in the hand of God, so that He turneth it whithersoever He willeth.'"

"That we are able to do good is of God, but that we actually do it is of ourselves."

"That we are able to make a good use of speech comes from God; but that we do actually make this good use of speech proceeds from ourselves."

"That we are able to think a good thought comes from God, but that we actually think a good thought proceeds from ourselves."

"[When we talk about grace in the New Testament we are talking about a] grace [that] is bestowed in order that what God commands may be the more easily fulfilled. [This "grace" should be understood to be the gift of the Holy Spirit who was not given as an indwelling presence under the Old Testament dispensation.]"

"But while we have within us a free will so strong and so steadfast against sinning, which our Maker has implanted in human nature generally, still, by His unspeakable goodness, we are further defended by His own daily help." (from Book 1)

"[Grace is sent by God] in order that men may more easily accomplish by grace that which they are commanded to do by free will."

"We hold likewise one baptism, which we aver ought to be administered to infants in the same sacramental formula as it is to adults."

[There is a fictional discussion in Book 3 between Pelagius and an opponent.]

[Opponent: I insist that these words of the apostle, 'For what I would, that do I not' and 'I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind' intimate that man cannot live without sin.]

"[Pelagius:] Now that which you wish us to understand of the apostle himself, all Church writers assert that he spoke in the person of the sinner, and of one who was still under the law,--such a man as was, by reason of a very long custom of vice, held bound, as it were, by a certain necessity of sinning, and who, although he desired good with his will, in practice indeed was hurried headlong into evil. In the person, however, of one man the apostle designates the people who still sinned under the ancient law. This nation he declares was to be delivered from this evil of custom through Christ, who first of all remits all sins in baptism to those who believe in Him, and then urges them by an imitation of Himself to perfect holiness, and by the example of His own virtues overcomes the evil custom of their sins."

"The blessed Bishop Ambrose in whose writings the Roman faith shines forth with especial brightness, and whom the Latin's have always regarded as the very flower and glory of their authors, and who has never found a foe bold enough to censure his faith or the purity of his understanding of the Scriptures." (from Book3)

"Everything good, and everything evil, on account of which we are either laudable or blameworthy, is not born with us but done by us: for we are born not fully developed, but with a capacity for either conduct; and we are procreated as without virtue, so also without vice; and previous to the action of our own proper will, that alone is in man which God has formed." (from Book 1)

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**Quotes compiled by Jesse Morrell** (*Taken from Pelagius: Life and Letters by Rees*):

"Obedience results from a decision of the mind, not the substance of the body." Pelagius

"those who are unwilling to correct their own way of life appear to want to correct nature itself instead." Pelagius

"And lest, on the other hand, it should be thought to be nature's fault that some have been unrighteous, I shall use the evidence of the scripture, which everywhere lay upon sinners the heavy weight of the charge of having used their own will and do not excuse them for having acted only under constraint of nature." Pelagius

"Yet we do not defend the good of nature to such an extent that we claim that it cannot do evil, since we undoubtedly declare also that it is capable of good and evil; we merely try to protect it from an unjust charge, so that we may not seem to be forced to do evil through a fault of our nature, when, in fact, we do neither good nor evil without the exercise of our will and always have the freedom to do one of the two, being always able to do either." Pelagius

"Nothing impossible has been commanded by the God of justice and majesty...Why do we indulge in pointless evasions, advancing the frailty of our own nature as an objection to the one who commands us? No one knows better the true measure of our strength than he who has given it to us nor does anyone understand better how much we are able to do than he who has given us this very capacity of ours to be able; nor has he who is just wished to command anything impossible or he who is good intended to condemn a man for doing what he could not avoid doing." Pelagius

"Grace indeed freely discharges sins, but with the consent and choice of the believer."  
Pelagius

"Our most excellent Creator wished us to be able to do either but actually to do only one, that is, good, which he also commanded, giving us the capacity to do evil only so that we might do his will by exercising our own. That being so, this very capacity to do evil is also good - good, I say, because it makes the good part better by making it voluntary and independent, not bound by necessity but free to decide for itself." Pelagius

"Is it possible then possible for a man not to sin? Such a claim is indeed a hard one and a bitter pill for sinners to swallow; it pains the ears of all who desire to live unrighteously. Who will find it easy now to fulfil the demands of righteousness, when there are some who find it hard even to listen to them?" An unknown Pelagian

"When will a man guilty of any crime or sin accept with a tranquil mind that his wickedness is a product of his own will, not of necessity, and allow what he now strives to attribute to nature to be ascribed to his own free choice? It affords endless comfort to transgressors of the divine law if they are able to believe that their failure to do something

is due to inability rather than disinclination, since they understand from their natural wisdom that no one can be judged for failing to do the impossible and that what is justifiable on grounds of impossibility is either a small sin or none at all." An unknown Pelagian

"Under the plea that it is impossible not to sin, they are given a false sense of security in sinning...Anyone who hears that it is not possible for him to be without sin will not even try to be what he judges to be impossible, and the man who does not try to be without sin must perforce sin all the time, and all the more boldly because he enjoys the false security of believing that it is impossible for him not to sin...But if he were to hear that he is able not to sin, then he would have exerted himself to fulfill what he now knows to be possible when he is striving to fulfill it, to achieve his purpose for the most part, even if not entirely." An unknown Pelagian

"Consider first whether that which is such that a man cannot be without it ought to be described as sin at all; for everything which cannot be avoided is now put down to nature but it is impious to say that sin is inherent in nature, because in this way the author of nature is being judged at fault." An unknown Pelagian

"How can it be proper to call sin by that name if, like other natural things, it cannot be avoided, since all sin is to be attributed to the free choice of the will, not the defects of nature." An unknown Pelagian