

The Pelagian "Boogie Man"

by Jonathan Duttweiler

For many so-called "evangelicals", primarily of the "Reformed" tradition, throwing around the term *Pelagian* or *Pelagianism* is the theological equivalent of the "boogie man" used by some to scare small children. It is, in most Protestant, and certainly Evangelical, circles considered **The** heresy. A certain website even categorizes other Christian sites as "really bad theology", practically the worst sobriquet being, "pelagianism is alive and well on the Web".

The problem is Pelagius himself did not teach what has come to be called *Pelagianism*, which was rather outlined by his disciple Coelestius. Furthermore, the subsequent triumph of the Augustinian position over *Pelagianism* came, not so much through scriptural debate and theological discourse, but (as happened often during the formative period of the Church and, perhaps of more interest to this discussion, later in 16th Century Holland in the dispute between the Remonstrants and Calvinists) by political subterfuge and, at times, outright bribery.

While most intense debates tend to drive the respective opponents to the logical extremes of their positions, Pelagius' initial position may be summed up simply as "what God commands man is able to do". I think most would agree that his basic principle is sound: "God now commands all men everywhere to repent" so **all** men everywhere have the *ability* to repent!

Pelagius' position was formulated primarily as a response to Augustine, whose *doctrine of grace* he felt to be a threat to human *responsibility* as well as *freedom*. Pelagius was interested in leaving no excuse for those who would *impute* their sin to a supposed *sinful nature*. Pelagius asserted that God made man free and that the power **not** to sin is in the human nature via creation. He held that Adam's sin is **not** the sin of all humanity and that it would be absurd and unjust to condemn all of mankind for the sin of Adam. While he admitted that the power of Satan and the flesh were intense, his position was that God gives power to overcome them. He also asserted that every man sins *for himself* out of his own *free will* and, thus, infants who died before baptism were **not** lost due to Adam's guilt.

Interestingly enough, his position on grace seems to me to be quite similar to the doctrine of *prevenient grace* found in Wesley and Arminian theologians. Pelagius held to a concept of *original grace* or *grace of creation* which is given to all men (sound familiar?). Admittedly, he did not view it as a special action of God, but rather simply that which is given men as part of their creation. It might be called, though somewhat of an oxymoron, *natural grace*, but certainly seems similar to Finney's (and others') postulation of *natural ability*.

Pelagius' view on *special* grace, or what might be termed *saving* grace, certainly parallels Finney's. This grace consists, not in the granting of the power to do that which one **could not** do, but in illumination and revelation to woo and encourage men to do that which they **will not** do.

Finally, Pelagius asserted a *grace of pardon* or *remission* of sin which God grants to those who **freely** repent. Contrary to the charge that Pelagius denied the need for the grace of God, he asserts that without such grace men cannot be forgiven.

As to Augustine's disputes with Coelestius, what we know of Coelestius' position is limited to what Augustine presents in his writings. These *may* or *may not* be accurate portrayals of his position. Augustine summarized them in nine points:

1. That Adam was created mortal, for he would have died no matter whether he had sinned or not;
2. That Adam's sin injured him only, and not all of mankind;
3. That the Law, as well as the gospel, leads to the Kingdom;
4. That there were men before the time of Christ who lived without sin;
5. That recently born infants are in the same state as was Adam before his fall;
6. That the whole of mankind does not die in the death or fall of Adam, nor does it resurrect in the resurrection of Christ;
7. That man, if he **WILL**, can live without sin;
8. That unbaptized infants attain eternal life;
9. That the rich who are baptized will have no merit, nor will they inherit the Kingdom of God, if they do not renounce their possessions.

While many will find something to disagree with in this presentation, many (as I do) will also find much they **can** and **do** agree with.

It is interesting to note in this discussion the influences of both Manicheism and Neoplatonism on the the theology of Augustine. While he later came to reject Manicheism, it seems apparent that its dualism, especially in its emphasis on the utter inability of the "natural" to do good, creeps into Augustine's later theology. Manicheism's rejection of Hebrew scriptures also finds its way into Augustine's theological propensities. It was upon listening to Ambrose's allegorical interpretation of the OT which removed one of Augustine's intellectual barriers to becoming a Christian - he disliked the God he believed the OT revealed. Augustine's reading of Neoplatonists (probably Plotinus, Porphyry and others) certainly formed the intellectual framework for his approach to Christian thought. Certainly Augustine's doctrine of God is Neoplatonic at its core. Justo Gonzalez notes in the second volume of his work *A History of Christian Thought*:

...those who were inclined to come to the defense of human capabilities and participation in the work of salvation...were at the same time most stringently opposed to the use of philosophy in the realm of theology. On the other hand, the Augustinians, who

emphasized man's impotence to deliver himself from sin, were at the same time the most willing to make use of philosophy in theological inquiry.

It is little wonder then that the God of Augustinian theology has far more in common with the Platonic notion of the "ideal" and the "ground of being" than with the portrait of a dynamic, free and open God given in the Old Testament.

It is also easy to see that theology, much like history, is written by the *victors*. Now, when theological consensus is achieved through discourse and sincere debate, with truth and faithfulness to scripture being honored above all else, there is much to commend the positions achieved. However, when theological *unity* comes about through the use of political force (as it did with the Western Church prior to the Reformation and with much of the Protestant Church in Holland, Switzerland and even England), then those of conscience are not required to consider these theological proclamations as authoritative or representative of a God approved *orthodoxy*. While much that has been termed *Pelagianism* ought to be rejected, the continued use of the adjective *Pelagian*, simply lowers theological discourse to the level of straw man arguments and *ad hominem* attacks. Surely the cause of Christ deserves better from those who claim to be His most ardent defenders!