

Doctrine of Pelagianism

The Pelagian Captivity of the Church

1. Pelagius (c. 390 – 418), was a British born ascetic moralist who opposed the Biblical doctrine of predestination, and advocated the doctrine of free will.
2. He was accused by Augustine of Hippo of denying the need for divine intervention in coming to faith, and performing good works.
3. There were several main points Pelagius tried to defend.
 - Free will is the grace of God. Grace is also found in the giving of the Law. Man can, and must, obey it.
 - Though mankind was wounded by Adam's sin, individuals are still able to fulfill the Law.
 - The doctrine of original sin is not true. The sin of Adam is not imputed to his offspring. Every person is responsible for their own heart. *Deuteronomy 24:16 The fathers shall not be put to death for the children, neither shall the children be put to death for the fathers: every man shall be put to death for his own sin.*
4. Pelagius was a highly educated person. He was fluent in Greek and Latin, and well versed in theology. As a persuasive speaker, Pelagius was able to win many converts to a life of asceticism.
5. The most important works of Pelagius can still be read.
 - AD 412 "*De peccatorum meritis et remissione libri III*" (Three Books on the Merits and Forgiveness of Sins), AD 412
 - AD 414 "*De spiritu et littera*" (On the Spirit and the Letters)
 - AD 415 "*De perfectione iustitiae hominis*" (The Perfection of the Justice of Man). In this work, under public pressure, Pelagius reversed himself, and strongly affirmed the existence of original sin, the need for infant baptism, the impossibility of a sinless life without Christ, and the necessity of Christ's grace.
6. While in Palestine, Pelagius befriended Jerome, who became alarmed at his friend's teachings and wrote against Pelagius in his "Letter of Ctesiphon" and "*Dialogus contra Pelagianos*".
7. In July, AD 415, Bishop John of Jerusalem, who knew Pelagius personally, called a church council to address the growing controversy around the initial views of Pelagius. It was inconclusive.

8. In December, AD 415, another synod in Diosopolis (Lydda) under the bishop of Caesarea was called by two deposed bishops who had travelled to the Holy Land. A surprising judgment was passed.

"Now since we have received satisfaction in respect of the charges brought against the monk Pelagius in his presence and since he gives his assent to sound doctrines but condemns and anathematizes those contrary to the faith of the Church, we adjudge him to belong to the communion of the Catholic Church."

9. Following his acquittal, Pelagius returned to advocating what he truly believed. He wrote two major treatises which are no longer extant.

- *On Nature*
- *Defense of the Freedom of the Will*

10. That mankind can avoid sinning, and that we can freely choose to obey God's commandments, stand at the core of Pelagian teaching. Pelagius stressed human autonomy, and freedom of the will

11. R. C. Sproul marks this time period as The Pelagian Captivity of the Church, for the ideas of Pelagius captured the imagination of many, and continues to do so today.

12. To Pelagius' argument that it is blasphemy to say that it is impossible to do what God has commanded, Augustine famously responded, "*non possum non peccare*" (I cannot, not sin).

13. Augustine, shocked that Pelagius and his disciple, Celestius, were not universally denounced as heretics, called the Council of Carthage in AD 418, and stated nine beliefs of the Church that Pelagianism denied.

- Death came from sin, not man's physical nature.
- Infants must be baptized in order to be cleansed from original sin.
- Justifying grace covers past sins, and helps avoid future sins.
- The grace of Christ imparts strength and will to act out God's commandments.
- No good works can come without God's grace.
- We confess we are sinners because it is true, not from humility.
- The saints ask for forgiveness for their own sins.
- The saints also confess to be sinners because they are.
- Children dying without baptism are excluded from both the Kingdom of heaven and eternal life.

14. After his condemnation, Pelagius was expelled from Jerusalem, and Saint Cyril of Alexandria allowed him to settle in Egypt. He was not heard of after that.

15. Pelagius and Caelestius were declared heretics again by the First Council of Ephesus in 431.
16. Today, the influence of Pelagius is felt in the modern church because of the work of Charles Grandison Finney (August 29, 1792 – August 16, 1875), whose *Systematic Theology* has been embraced by many.
17. Finney is considered the Father of Modern Evangelism. He is credited with leading 500,000 people to Christ. The methodologies he used were passed on to Billy Sunday and others.
18. B. B. Warfield said of Finney's theology, that God could be eliminated entirely without being missed. That is a terrible indictment, but true.
19. Like Pelagius, Finney exalts the free will of man, denies original sin, and believes in a salvation by moral works.
20. Finney rejected the evangelical doctrine of justification by the imputation of the righteousness of Christ, and the *sole fide* or salvation by grace alone, through faith alone.
21. Uniting with Rome, Finney did not believe that God would ever declare a person legally just who was not just.
22. Dismissing the many biblical texts that expressly say righteousness is imputed to believers for their justification, he wrote,

“These and similar passages are relied upon, as teaching the doctrine of an imputed righteousness; and such as these: "The Lord our righteousness" (Phil. 3:9). . . . "Christ our righteousness" is Christ the author or procurer of our justification. But this does not imply that He procures our justification by imputing His obedience to us. . . [Charles Finney, *Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Bethany), 372-73].”
23. If *sola fide* is an essential article of evangelical theology, and it is, then how can Charles Finney, who rejected *sola fide*, be an evangelical, or even an orthodox Christian?
24. Pelagianism, and Finneyism, leads to “easy believism”, and “decisional regeneration.”

Special Note.

This form of evangelism is based upon the false assumption that it is through human ability a person is saved, and it is through individuals being persuasive that a soul is saved. In other words, it is a man centered approach to evangelism that does not ultimately need divine enablement.

25. If the Holy Spirit is not needed in order for a person to be converted then the teaching, and methodology advocated by Charles Finney is valid.
26. Regarding the Atonement, Finney rejected the idea of the merit of Christ being imputed to someone else. Phillip R. Johnson explains.

“What seemed to chafe Finney most about evangelical Christianity was the belief that Christ's atonement is a penal satisfaction offered to God. Finney wrote, "I had read nothing on the subject [of the atonement] except my Bible, & what I had there found on the subject I had interpreted as I would have understood the same or like passages in a law book" [Memoirs, 42].

Thus applying nineteenth-century American legal standards to the biblical doctrine of atonement, he concluded that it would be legally unjust to impute the sinner's guilt to Christ, or to impute Christ's righteousness to the sinner. As noted above, Finney labeled imputation a "theological fiction" [Memoirs, 58-61]. In essence, this was a denial of the core of evangelical theology, repudiating the heart of Paul's argument about justification by faith in Romans 3-5 (see especially Rom. 4:5)—in effect nullifying the whole gospel!

Further, by ruling out the imputation of guilt and righteousness, Finney was forced to argue that Christ's death should not be regarded as an actual atonement for others' sins. Finney replaced the doctrine of substitutionary atonement with a version of Grotius's "governmental theory" (the same view being revived by those today who tout "moral government theology").

The Grotian view of the atonement is laden with strong Pelagian tendencies. By cutting the sinner off from the imputation of Christ's righteousness, this view automatically requires sinners to attain a righteousness of their own (contra Rom. 10:3). When he embraced such a view of the atonement, Finney had no choice but to adopt a theology that magnifies human ability, and minimizes God's role in changing human hearts. He wrote, for example,

There is nothing in religion beyond the ordinary powers of nature. A revival is not a miracle, nor dependent on a miracle, in any sense. It is a purely philosophical result of the right use of the constituted means—as much so as any other effect produced by the application of means. . . . A revival is as naturally a result of the use of means as a crop is of the use of its appropriate means" [Charles Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, n.d.), 4-5].

Thus Finney constantly downplayed God's work in our salvation, understated the hopelessness of the sinner's condition, and overestimated the power of sinners to change their own hearts. When those errors are traced to their source, what we find is a deficient view of the atonement. Indeed, Finney's denial of vicarious atonement underlies and explains virtually all his theological aberrations” (A Wolf in Sheep’s Clothing).

27. If Christ cannot give His life for others as a substitute, and satisfy the righteousness of God in atonement, then all hope is lost.
28. According to Finney, Christ did not satisfy the justice of God, though Finney did promote the idea that Christ “satisfied” public justice.
29. That is, by the Cross, God demonstrated that He takes sin seriously, and that we should take sin seriously. If we do not repent of our sins we will face His wrath.

30. God saves us, not by justifying us, but by pardoning us.
31. Now, said Finney, because God does pardon sinners, that expression of His mercy and grace could lead to a cavalier view towards the law, and righteousness, and away from the need for repentance. So, in order to display to the world His hatred for sin, and the seriousness of His wrath against sin, there is the cross. But the cross is not redemptive.
32. Finney did not believe a personal atonement had been made for you, or for me. He believed that a general atonement had been made to morally influence society and to display the seriousness of evil. The atonement satisfies public justice, in that it places a guard against moral lawlessness.
33. Finney called people to be moral, to stop sinning, and to be righteous. People need to be sanctified, before they can be justified in the sight of God. Justification depends upon sanctification.
34. This view of salvation is a reversal of orthodox Christianity which teaches that sanctification grows out of justification. We are justified by Christ, and then we are conformed into His image.
- *2 Corinthians 5:17 Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.*
35. Basis to Finney's theology is his denial of original sin. Man, in his natural state is not corrupt. He does not possess a sin nature that compels him to do evil. Man does evil because of his own free will. And, because of that free will, an individual can chose to be better and to do good.
36. Finney believed man had the natural ability to be righteous, and also the moral ability. He was reacting against Jonathan Edwards, who had taught that man had the natural ability to do good, but we do not have the moral ability to do those things that please God.
37. Finney defined regeneration as the change brought about by a choice in the human being. It is a change of behavior when a person is persuaded of the need to change, and makes a decision to change.

All sinners can freely reform their own hearts, and must do so themselves if they are to be redeemed.

"[Sinners] are under the necessity of first changing their hearts, or their choice of an end, before they can put forth any volitions to secure any other than a selfish end. And this is plainly the everywhere assumed philosophy of the Bible. That uniformly represents the unregenerate as totally depraved,[3] and calls upon them to repent, to make themselves a new heart" [Systematic Theology, 249]."

Charles Finney was not ashamed to take credit for his own conversion. Having rejected *sola fide*, and *sola gratia*, Finney was able to boast, despite the gospel teaching that salvation is not of works. *Ephesians 2:9 Not of works, lest any man should boast.*

As John MacArthur points out,

“In Finney's telling of [his conversion] story, it becomes clear that he believed his own will was the determinative factor that brought about his salvation: "On a Sabbath evening [in the autumn of 1821,] I made up my mind that I would settle the question of my soul's salvation at-once, that if it were possible I would make my peace with God" [Memoirs, 16, emphasis added]. Evidently under intense conviction, Finney went into the woods, where he made a promise "that I would give my heart to God [that day] or die in the attempt [Memoirs, 16]. [John MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1993), 236.]

38. In the theology of Charles Finney, the natural man is alive and well. The natural man may be wounded, but he can be made spiritually whole by his own will. Regeneration is a choice of man's free will and is not a matter of God's sovereign, and electing grace whereby those whom the Father has given to the Son shall be regenerated by the Holy Spirit. In Finney's theology, salvation is not of the Lord, but of the moral reformation of man based upon his own free will.