

Pelagianism

The Ancient Heresy That Still Haunts the Church

"Man is basically good."

How many times have you heard that? In self-help books, in casual conversations, even in some churches—there's a **subtle but deadly assumption** that humans are inherently good and simply need **better education, stronger discipline, or the right environment** to reach their full potential.

But this idea isn't just **wrong**—it's **heresy**.

This is **Pelagianism**, one of the most dangerous distortions of biblical truth ever introduced into Christian thought. It was condemned as heresy in the **5th century**, yet it still **lurks in modern Christianity**, disguised as motivational preaching, self-improvement theology, and works-based salvation.

Let's break it down.

What Is Pelagianism?

Pelagianism is named after **Pelagius**, a British monk who lived in the **4th-5th century**. He denied **original sin** and taught that:

- ❌ **Humans are born morally neutral, not sinful.**
- ❌ **Adam's sin only set a bad example—it didn't corrupt humanity.**
- ❌ **People can achieve righteousness on their own, without divine grace.**
- ❌ **Grace is helpful but not necessary for salvation.**

This teaching **directly contradicts Scripture**, which declares that **all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God** (Romans 3:23) and that **no one is righteous—not even one** (Romans 3:10).

In response, the Church **rightly condemned Pelagianism as heresy** at the **Council of Carthage (418 AD)** and later at the **Council of Ephesus (431 AD)**.

But Pelagian thinking **never really died**—it simply took new forms.

Why Pelagianism Is a Theological Disaster

Pelagianism **flips the Gospel upside down** and destroys **the core doctrines of grace and salvation**. Here's why:

⚠️ 1. It Denies the Sinfulness of Humanity

The Bible teaches that **we are born in sin, not spiritual neutrality**:

"Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me." (Psalm 51:5)

Adam's fall didn't just **set a bad example**—it **corrupted human nature**. We are not **neutral decision-makers** who simply need guidance; we are **spiritually dead** and need resurrection (Eph. 2:1-5).

Pelagianism **downplays** or **outright denies** this reality, leading people to **trust in themselves rather than in Christ**.

⚠️ 2. It Makes Grace Optional, Not Essential

If people are born **morally neutral**, then grace is **a helpful tool, not a life-giving necessity**.

But Scripture is clear:

"No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him." (John 6:44)

Grace isn't a **booster shot**—it's **oxygen for the spiritually dead**. Without it, salvation is impossible.

Pelagianism **shrinks grace** into nothing more than **divine encouragement**, instead of the **sovereign, regenerating power of God**.

⚠️ 3. It Leads to Works-Based Salvation

If you believe you are **naturally capable** of choosing righteousness, then **why do you need Christ's atonement at all?**

This is why Pelagianism always leads to:

- ❌ **Legalism**—Salvation becomes about effort, not grace.
- ❌ **Pride**—If I can earn salvation, then I can take credit for it.
- ❌ **Despair**—If I must achieve righteousness on my own, what happens when I fail?

But **salvation isn't about climbing up to God**—it's about God coming down to save sinners (Titus 3:5).

"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." (Ephesians 2:8-9)

Pelagianism **robs God of His glory** and makes salvation **man's achievement** instead of **God's gift**.

The Modern Forms of Pelagianism

Pelagian thinking is alive and well today, even in churches that claim to be biblical. It appears in **three major forms**:

◆ 1. Secular Humanism

The idea that **people are naturally good and just need to unlock their potential** is at the core of **self-help culture, therapy-driven faith, and progressive spirituality**.

☞ The Bible says **we need redemption, not self-improvement**.

◆ 2. Moralistic Preaching

Many pulpits today focus on **"being a better person"** rather than preaching **sin, grace, and the cross**.

- ✗ **"Just follow Jesus' example."**
- ✗ **"Be kind and love others, and God will accept you."**
- ✗ **"You can overcome sin with enough willpower."**

This **isn't the Gospel**—it's behavior modification.

☞ The Bible says **we need new hearts, not better habits** (Ezekiel 36:26).

◆ 3. Free Will Overemphasis

Some theological traditions emphasize **human choice in salvation** so much that they **unintentionally drift into Pelagianism**.

Pelagian logic:

- ✗ **If God's grace is resistible,**
- ✗ **And human nature is neutral,**
- ✗ **Then I am the decisive factor in my salvation.**

But if I am **spiritually dead**, then I won't choose Christ **unless He first makes me alive** (John 1:12-13, Eph. 2:4-5).

🔑 The Bible says **God is the initiator, not man** (Romans 9:16).

How Should Christians Respond?

Pelagianism is dangerous **because it appeals to human pride**—the belief that we are in **control of our salvation**.

To fight this, we must hold fast to **biblical truths**:

- ✅ **Humanity is totally depraved—We are not morally neutral (Romans 3:10-12).**
- ✅ **Grace is essential, not optional—Salvation is God’s work (John 6:44).**
- ✅ **Faith is a response, not a self-generated decision—It is a gift from God (Ephesians 2:8-9).**

We don’t **reach up to God**—He **reaches down to us**.

Salvation is by **grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone**—anything else is a false gospel.

“He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to His own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit.” (Titus 3:5)

Final Thought: Grace Alone Saves

Pelagianism isn’t just a **theological error**—it’s a **direct assault on the Gospel of grace**.

Either **God saves sinners**,

Or **we save ourselves**.

There is no in-between.

💬 **Have you encountered Pelagian thinking in today’s church? How should we respond? Let’s discuss.** 🗨️

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