

SCHOOL OF DISCIPLESHIP
CPC SPRING 2019
HERESIES AND ERRORS

**Pelagianism and Antinomianism:
On Salvation by Grace and the Place of God's Law**

1 | Key Questions

- What must we contribute to our salvation? How does this impact our view of humanity and what Christ accomplished?
- Isn't faith opposed to Law? Once a Christian, can't I disregard the Law in light of freedom?

2 | Key Terms

- ***Pelagianism*** - from the theologian Pelagius (360-418AD), contemporary of Augustine, his main critic. We know most about Pelagius because of his harsh critic, Augustine, on his views of free will, sin, grace, and salvation. It shares similarities with works righteousness, denying original sin, and making Christ an example of God's love.
 - All churches have condemned Pelagianism. Some would accuse Roman Catholics and Arminians to be "semi-Pelagianism" in a way that mingles grace and works to cooperate in salvation, though technically the historic church has also condemned semi-Pelagianism.
- ***Antinomianism*** - literally "against the law", usually arises in opposition to strict morality or works righteousness in order to (over-)emphasize the free grace of God
 - More contemporary forms often come through "grace-centered" teachings that oversimplify sanctification, as if all you need to do is remember you're forgiven and justified, and you'll grow in sanctification.

3 | Why is it attractive?

- ***Pelagianism*** -
 - Seems to increase motivation for moral seriousness and is often related to legalism (why?)
 - Seems to make God "more fair" without original sin
 - There's a "common sense" factor to it, which may even make it sound American because you can "be all you can be"
- ***Antinomianism*** -
 - Seems to really celebrate Christ's victory for us over sin, since it can cite many verses that celebrate our freedom from the law
 - Avoids works righteousness and all the ugliness of self-righteous Christians

- How could you imagine Paul being accused of being a moralist for some passages and an antinomian for others?

4 | What unites these two polar opposites? Our view of God and his Law (from Sinclair Ferguson's *The Whole Christ*)

1. Begun in the Garden, there was a "divorce between God's revealed will and his gracious, generous character. . . . *In Eve's case antinomianism was itself an expression of her legalism!* . . . Legalism is simply separating the law of God from the person of God . . . [out of a] distorted view of God as the giver of his law. . . . The 'lie' that we now believe is that 'to glorify God' is not, indeed cannot be, 'to enjoy him forever,' but to lose all joy." - 82-4
 1. "The more basic issue is: How do I think about God, and what instincts and dispositions and affections toward him does this evoke in me?" - 85
2. It is "too possible to have an *evangelical head* and a *legalistic heart*. . . for one of the diseases the *marrow* [controversy] exposed was the subtle thought that my growth in holiness strengthens my **justification**. Confirm it? Yes. But strengthen it? Never! Does this sound slightly antinomian? Of course - *but only if one is listening with legalistic ears.*" - 95
3. The remedy for legalism is grace, but "it is not 'grace' as commodity, grace as substance (i.e. Catholic). It is grace in Christ. For God's grace to us *is* Christ. Yes, it is the atonement; but not atonement as theory, or as an abstract reality, something that has an identity of its own outside of and apart from the Lord Jesus. For Christ himself, clothed as he is in the gospel work, *is* the atonement - 'He is the propitiation for our sins.'" - 134
4. *The Spirit writing the Law on our hearts*
 1. "As Moses ascended Mount Sinai and brought down the Law on tablets of stone, now Christ has ascended into the heavenly Mount, but in contrast to Moses, he has sent down the Spirit who rewrites the law but not merely on tablets of stone but in our hearts. There is a recalibration to Eden, albeit in the heart of a person formerly enslaved to sin, bearing its marks, and living in a world still under the dominion of sin. Now the empowerment is within, through the indwelling of Christ the obedient one, the law keeper, by the Spirit. . . . the Christian can no more be an antinomian than he can adopt the view that salvation is not the restoration of his life as the image of God." (169-70)

5 | Thinking More About Pelagianism, (from BB Warfield on Augustine)

“The peculiar individualism of the Pelagian view of the world comes out strongly in their failure to perceive the *effect of habit on nature itself*. Just as they conceived of virtue as a complex of virtuous acts, so they conceived of *sin exclusively as an act, or series of disconnected acts*. Thus the will was isolated from its acts, and the acts from each other, and all organic connection or continuity of life was not only overlooked but denied. After each act of the will, man stood exactly where he did before: indeed this conception scarcely allows for the existence of a ‘man’ – only a willing machine is left, at each click of the action of which the spring regains its original position, and is equally ready as before to perform its function. In such a conception there was no place for character: freedom of will was all. Thus it was not an unnatural mistake which they made, when they forgot the man altogether, and attributed to the faculty of free will, the ability that belonged rather to the man whose faculty it is, and who is properly responsible for the use he makes of it. Here lies the essential error of their doctrine of free will: they looked upon freedom in its form only, and not in its matter; and, keeping man in perpetual and hopeless equilibrium between good and evil, they permitted no growth of character and no advantage to himself to be gained by man in his successive choices of good.

“It need not surprise us that the type of thought which thus dissolved the organism of the man into a series of disconnected voluntary acts, failed to comprehend the *solidarity of the race*. To the Pelagian, Adam was a man, nothing more; and it was simply unthinkable that any act of his that left his own subsequent acts uncommitted, could entail sin and guilt upon other men. The same theory that dissolved the individual into a succession of voluntary acts, could not fail to separate the race into a heap of unconnected units. If sin, as the Pelagian declared, is nothing but will, and the will itself remained intact after each act, how could the individual act of an individual will condition the acts of men as yet unborn? By ‘imitation’ of his act alone could (under such a conception) other men be affected.

“And this carried with it the *corresponding view of man’s relation to Christ*. He could forgive us the sin we had committed; He could teach us the true way; He could set us a holy example; and He could exhort us to its imitation. But He could not touch us to enable us to will the good, without destroying the absolute equilibrium of the will between good and evil; and to destroy this was to destroy its freedom, which was the crowning good of our divinely created nature. Surely the Pelagian forgot that man was not made for will, but will for man.

“*Man needs something more than to know the right way: he needs to love it, or he will not walk in it*; and all mere teaching, which can do nothing more than bring us

knowledge of what we ought to do, is but the letter that killeth. What we need is some inward, Spirit-given aid to the keeping of what by the law we know ought to be kept. Mere knowledge slays: while to lead a holy life is the gift of God.” [This also led them to believe that physical death was part of man's nature. Why?]

6 | Self-Reflection

- If you had to pick, which one is *worse* - a legalist or antinomian?
 - Then you're probably the opposite of what you answered!
- Do you struggle more with being a legalist/Pelagian or an antinomian? Why would that be?
 - How does that connect directly with your view of who God is?