

## Pelagianism: Old Heresy, Still Attractive

By Joe Heschmeyer – Reprinted from *Catholic Answers*

If you spend too much time on the internet, you may have seen the historian and author Diana Butler Bass's [impassioned defense of Pelagianism](#). In it, she says "Pelagianism helped save my life" and that "declaring Pelagianism a heresy was, in my opinion as a human being and a church historian, the worst mistake western Christianity ever made."

The defense of Pelagianism is fascinating, if only because it's rare to see someone owning the label. Moreover, there's a great deal of confusion about who [Pelagius](#) (c. 354-418) was and what he actually taught. Indeed, much of what we know of his doctrine comes from the writings of his opponents, although some of his own writings remain.

The real-life Pelagius was from somewhere in the British Isles and became a monk in Rome. He once was well respected for his asceticism and his apparent holiness, but as time went on, he became increasingly fixated on defending his own heretical views. Just what were those views?

**An easy (somewhat simplified) way to understand the matter** is that if Calvinists err in one direction, seeming to reject the goodness of man as God's creation, Pelagians err in the opposite direction, treating humanity as so good as not to need redemption.

In his defense, Pelagius's motives in teaching this seem to have been good. In [a letter to Demetrias](#), he lamented that "most people look at the virtues in others, and imagine that such virtues are far beyond their reach. Yet God has implanted in every person the capacity to attain the very highest level of virtue."

Herein lies the half-truth of Pelagianism. Pelagius was right to preach something greater than lukewarm holiness, calling Christians to strive not only for *good*, but for *perfect*. The Christian message is radical, after all: "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). And settling for lukewarmness is spiritual suicide, as we see from Christ's words to the church of Laodicea: "I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth" (Rev. 3:15-16).

But there's a problem with achieving perfection. Pelagius admitted as much, saying that "people cannot grow in virtue on their own." Here, you might expect that he would say that what we need is Christ, or divine mercy, or grace. Instead, he says: "We each need companions to guide and direct us on the way of righteousness." That is, instead of turning toward God and grace, the Pelagian impulse is to encourage one another to a perfection that (if we're just careful enough) we can achieve ourselves. It is here that Pelagianism goes dangerously astray.

The hallmark of Pelagianism is a denial of original sin and a belief in human perfectibility, seemingly apart from divine grace. Pelagius described the human condition by saying that "day by day, hour by hour, we have to reach decisions; and in each decision, we can choose good or evil. The freedom to choose makes us like God: if we choose evil, that freedom becomes a curse; if we choose good, it becomes our greatest blessing." Explicitly, Pelagius denied that this godlike ability was the result of grace, or Christianity, since "the goodness we see in pagans is proof of the goodness of God. He has granted every person, regardless of race or religion, the freedom to choose good or evil."

At this point, you may be thinking Pelagius's view of the human condition sounds a lot like what many modern Christians believe. But Pelagius saw more clearly where that line of reasoning leads. First, it logically entails that the Fall of Adam and Eve was good, not evil, since their "banishment from Eden is in truth the story of how the human race gained its freedom." He explained:

When Adam and Eve lived in the Garden of Eden they were like small children: they simply obeyed God's instructions without considering the moral reasons for those instructions. To become mature they needed to learn the distinction for themselves between right and wrong, good and evil. And God gave them the opportunity to become mature by putting within the garden the tree of knowledge, by which they could learn this distinction. But if God had simply instructed Adam and Eve to eat from the tree, and they had obeyed, they would have been acting like children. So he forbade them from eating the fruit; this meant that they themselves had to make a decision, whether to eat or not to eat. . . . By defying God, Adam and Eve grew to maturity in his image.

A theology that praises man for "defying God" should set off alarm bells.

**The trouble with Pelagianism doesn't stop there.** In this view, Jesus is no longer our redeemer so much as simply a helpful model of living a holy life. As Pelagius describes it, "in the teachings and the example of Jesus Christ we learn the general principles of behavior which pleases God." Even when he says we are "reborn" through Christ, it's only "because we can see clearly how we should live." It's not so much that Christ saves us, but that we (following the example of Christ) save ourselves.

In all of this, Pelagius is ascribing to our human nature, or our reason, or our good actions, things that Scripture instead ascribes to God and to divine grace. As St. Paul explains, it is "by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God—not because of works, lest any man should boast" (Eph. 2:8-9).

Butler Bass's own writings reveal the dangerous consequences of Pelagian thinking. She is the author of *Freeing Jesus*, which Fr. James Martin has praised as "an inviting, accessible, provocative, challenging and always inspiring look" at the "heart of Christianity" from "one of our great Christian writers," and which Butler Bass describes as being interwoven with her Pelagian theology. As she explains in the book's introduction, the title comes from her belief that an icon of Jesus in the National Cathedral spoke to her and said, "Get me out of here." The book is largely about "liberating" Jesus from our traditional view of him. For instance, instead of the cross, Butler Bass says that "the circle best illustrates my experience of Jesus," and she presents an image of what her idea of what it means to believe in "the welcoming and inclusive Jesus, the Jesus *of* the circle and *in* the circle" (p. 261). It is, in short, a vision of Jesus as a visionary, but nothing more. She describes a mental image of

Jesus sitting in a circle with Patanjali, the Buddha, Muhammad, Guru Nanak, and Confucius; with saints and mystics and seers. *In the circle*. Not above it, not beyond it. *In the circle*. With me, with all of us in the circle (pp. 259-60).

Such a vision of Christ might seem far afield from the Christian perfectionism toward which Pelagius was striving, but it's really just a matter of bringing Pelagius's theology full circle. After all, if Pelagius is right, Jesus is not our redeemer—he's simply a good moral example. And that's why the Church considers Pelagianism a heresy. A church without Christ as its head, no matter how good it makes its adherents feel, is not really a church at all. It's just another false teaching.