

The History of the Doctrine of Justification...



**How Christ
preserved
the good
news in
history**

The Work of Christ Pelagius: Lord, We Are Able

There are two great tethers that keep the church anchored to biblical Christianity. Broadly speaking they concern (1) the Person of Christ, and (2) the Work of Christ. Another way to state the same thing is to say that these two great tethers answer the questions (1) who was Christ? and (2) what did He accomplish?

Thus far, we have spent our time looking at the first anchor of biblical Christianity, the doctrine of the Person of Christ. We looked into the church's struggle with maintaining a biblical view of Christ in the face of various heresies. First, we examined how Athanasius fought Arius and those who wanted to diminish Christ's deity. We saw that the church was forced to think biblically about the necessity of Christ being God incarnate and we examined the Council of Nicea (325 AD) and the great Nicene Creed that came out of it.

Next our study switched from how the church struggled with understanding the deity of Christ to how it struggled with understanding the humanity of Christ. We did that when we examined how Cyril of Alexandria was forced to do battle with Nestorius over the proper understanding of Christ's human nature and how the church eventually spelled out its beliefs at the councils of both Ephesus (431 AD) and more importantly Chalcedon (451 AD).

If I could summarize what we've learned thus far it would be that:

- Christ is of the same essence (*homousias*) as the Father. He is not an inferior God. He is not a created being. He always existed in the form of God. He did not become God. He is what He has always been, God.
- Christ became man, that is he took upon Himself human flesh and a human soul. He added a human nature to His divine nature. These two natures were united in one person, Jesus Christ.
- Christ had two natures united in one person without confusion, without mixture, without division, and without separation, forever.

Now, I would add that these issues are not simply issues of speculation. They are vitally important because they have tremendous import with regard to our salvation. Unless Christ, was truly *man (vera homo)* He could not have atoned for our sins. Unless Christ was truly God (*vera Deus*), His atoning work could not have had eternal significance. Obviously, those are issues that have been relegated to lesser importance in our generation. We say they are important, but the energy we lend them betrays our innermost convictions. Today, we are vitally interested in, well, ourselves. You can see that by the steady diet of practical exhortation that encourages us to reflect on our significance, our lives, our problems. All the while, our hearts tell us that there are things that are really much more crucial, like how can I be reconciled to God and is there any objective evidence that we are not going to die in our sins.

Now to show you what I mean, I've asked Randy Buster to sing a bar song based on an idea from the Middle Ages; yes, that's right, he's going to sing a song reflecting the theology of medieval England. Let me say in advance, this is my idea. The song is cute but that's not the reason I asked him to sing it. What I want you to see is that in time past theology pervaded even the basest substrates of society. Used to death, formerly Christians saw the need to reflect upon important issues even at the tavern level. Today, not only do we not think about theological issues at the tavern, at lot of times we don't even reflect upon theology at church. That is, of course, the reason that we wilt like flowers in the Texas sun when conflict or suffering come along. So I asked Randy to sing the **Pelagian Drinking Song**. I implore you not to be offended and if you are

offended please restrict your anger to me. I only ask that you give close ear to the words, we'll discuss the theology afterwards.

The Pelagian Drinking Song

Pelagius lived at Kardanoë
And taught a doctrine there
How, whether you went to heaven or to hell
It was your own affair.
It had nothing to do with the Church, my boy,
But was your own affair.

No, he didn't believe
In Adam and Eve
He put no faith therein!
His doubts began
With the Fall of Man
And he laughed at Original Sin.
With my row-ti-tow
Ti-oodly-ow
He laughed at original sin.
Then came the bishop of old Auxerre
Germanus was his name
He tore great handfuls out of his hair
And he called Pelagius shame.
And with his stout Episcopal staff
So thoroughly whacked and banged
The heretics all, both short and tall --
They rather had been hanged.

Oh he whacked them hard, and he banged them long
Upon each and all occasions
Till they bellowed in chorus, loud and strong
Their orthodox persuasions.
With my row-ti-tow
Ti-oodly-ow
Their orthodox persuasions.

Now the faith is old and the Devil bold
Exceedingly bold indeed.
And the masses of doubt that are floating about
Would smother a mortal creed.
But we that sit in a sturdy youth
And still can drink strong ale
Let us put it away to infallible truth
That always shall prevail.

And thank the Lord
For the temporal sword
And howling heretics too.
And all good things
Our Christendom brings
But especially barley brew!
With my row-ti-tow
Ti-oodly-ow
Especially barley brew!

Pelagius was an Irish monk who lived at the end of the fourth century and the beginning of the fifth century. Pelagius had traveled from the British Isles and made his home in Rome. He was a devout man, strongly aesthetic. Apparently, he made himself a eunuch by means of self-mutilation. He was incensed at the sinfulness of Rome and he sat about preaching moral reform even moral perfection. He challenged his hearers to commit themselves to moral perfection, in all this, he did no wrong.

But there came a point in Pelagius ministry where he became particularly offended by a prayer credited to the bishop of Hippo, a man by the name of Augustine. Augustine often used the following phrase in his prayers:

Lord, Grant what You command,
And command what You will.

Pelagius was not offended by the second half of Augustine's prayer . Indeed, he viewed the right of the Creator to command of His creatures, whatsoever He wished. Pelagius was miffed at the initial phrase of Augustine's prayer. He hated the phrase, "Lord, Grant what you command." Pelagius thought that Augustine was implying that men were not capable of obeying all of God's righteous demands. He felt that Augustine was saying that men lacked the moral ability to keep the law of God; he felt that Augustine was arguing that men somehow are fallen, somehow tainted, that their will was somehow impaired. In both his understanding of Augustine and the implications of Augustine's prayer, Pelagius was not wrong.

Pelagius, however, rejected the implication of Augustine's prayer. Pelagius felt that if God commanded something of His creatures, the fact of the command itself implied the ability to keep the command, otherwise Pelagius argued God was intrinsically unfair. This brings us to the first important point of Pelagian theology which I have entitled, *Ought Implies Can*.

We asserted that a man could be without sin, and could keep God's commandments if he wished; for this capacity has been given to him by God.
(*Pelagius quoted by Augustine*)

In a tirade, angered by the claim of human weakness, the normally mild-mannered Pelagius mocked:

It is hard...it is difficult...we are not able...we are men...Oh! blind madness!...we accuse God of twofold ignorance...that He does not know what He has made, nor what He has commanded, as if forgetting the human weakness of which He himself is the author, He has imposed laws on man which he cannot endure.

Now the interesting thing is that once Pelagius made the decision that "ought implies can", he had to make a number of related logical propositions. First, in order to hold to the idea that "ought implies can", Pelagius had to abandon the idea of original sin. You can see why that would be a natural corollary of the first thought. If every person were able at any time to keep all the commands God had given, he would have to be free of any inherent guilt based upon his relationship to Adam. So, Pelagius claimed that there was no connection between Adam's sin and the propensity of humanity to sin.

Now what is really interesting is that when Pelagius was cornered he was not above being deceptive. Everyone knew he denied original sin. His students taught what they had learned from their master namely that:

Adam's sin injured only himself, and not the whole race of man...and infants at their birth are in the self-same state in which Adam was before he sinned;
Yet, when he was being examined for heresy he quickly and firmly anathematized all his students who claimed what he taught. Later, trying to regain the favor of his following he argued that what he meant during his

examination was that infants were not in the same state as Adam before the fall because they are infants and Adam was an adult. He also added that Adam had injured the race not by the imputation of a sinful nature but by his poor example.

...the reason why infants are not in the same state in which Adam was before the transgression, is because they are not yet able to receive the commandment, whereas he was able; and because they do not yet make use of that choice of a rational will which he certainly made use of, since otherwise no commandment would have been given to him”?

Pelagius rejecting the consequent of Adam’s sin even claimed that many Old Testament saints had lived sinless lives.

As regards man’s ability to be without sin, my opinion has been already spoken. With respect, however, to the allegation that there were even before the Lord’s coming persons who lived without sin, we also on our part say, that before the coming of Christ there certainly were persons who passed their lives in holiness and righteousness, according to the accounts which have been handed down to us in the Holy Scriptures.

(Pelagius quoted by Augustine)

Now follow the logic with me for a moment.

First, “ought implies can”.

So the fact that God gives us commands in the scripture means we have the inherent ability to keep His commands. It would be patently unfair, Pelagius argued, for God to give His creatures commands that they were incapable of obeying.

Secondly, since we have the ability to keep the commands of God, Adam’s sin could not have been imputed to us. There is no connection between Adam’s fall and our tendency to sin. Obviously, Pelagius had to come up with a reason why all men seem to have a tendency to sin. His solution was that all men follow Adam’s example. As a consequence of following Adam’s example, men develop

the habit of sinning, but sin is not a part of their nature. Listen to the way he says it.

Nor is there any reason why it is made difficult for us to do good other than that long habit of doing wrong which has infected us from childhood and corrupted us little by little over many years and ever after holds us in bondage and slavery to itself, so that it seems somehow to have acquired the force of nature (8:3)
(Letter to Demetrias)

So, Pelagius' logic concludes:

- ought implies can
- we suffer no effects from original sin
- we sin out of habit rather than because of our nature

But this last assertion forced Pelagius to answer two difficult questions. First, if we did not acquire a sin nature from Adam, do we acquire a sin nature when we commit acts of sin? Pelagius had to answer no. He believed we acquired no sin nature even when we committed acts of sin. He held that man was not only born without a propensity to sin but that he was by nature incontrovertibly good. Every time he sinned he wound up back at exactly the same place Adam did at creation, having to make a choice. Sin for Pelagius was not internal, it was external. It was pure act. The will remained free...incontrovertibly free.

You can see where his idea of imputation would lead. Adam's sin was not imputed to sinners, thus Christ's righteousness could not be imputed to sinners. Every man stood or fell based on his own actions. He even adopted the argument that if Adam's sin could be imputed to all men, then Christ's atoning work could also be imputed to every man.

Secondly, if Adam's nature was not effected others wanted to know why Adam died? Pelagius quickly answered that Adam was made mortal. He would have died whether he sinned or not. Death is not the result of sin, it is in fact the most natural thing in the world.

So, adding another plank to Pelagius' logic we see that:

- ought implies can
- we suffer no effects from original sin
- we sin out of habit rather than because of our nature
- we do not become sinners when we sin; death is a natural part of creation not related to sin

Since we do not become sinners when we sin, the obvious solution to all our estrangement before God is to simply quit sinning. For Pelagius, man has the moral ability to stop. Man has the will to stop. He only needs the motivation rather than inspiration to stop. Where would Pelagius find such a lofty inspiration? He found it in the example of moral perfection given by Christ.

He works in us to will what is good, to will what is holy, when He rouses us from our devotion to earthly desires, and from our love of the present only, after the manner of brute animals, by the magnitude of the future glory and the promise of its rewards; when by revealing wisdom to us He stirs up our sluggish will to a longing after God; when (what you are not afraid to deny in another passage) he persuades us to everything which is good.

So, for Pelagius Christ provides us with an example, not an atonement. We have the ability, we have the power to save ourselves. Now, you might be thinking, "Did he see no place for grace?" Yes, he did, but he redefined what grace meant. Biblically, grace always meant God's kindness, but Pelagius was absolutely committed to man's will be free. So for Pelagius, the most grace could be was an outward influence, an outward prod to do that which already lies within us. So Pelagius saw grace in the gospel, in the death of Christ, even in the commands of the law. Pelagius believed that grace was not displayed in an inward transformation of our fallen natures. Instead, he believed that grace could be found in any number of things, stirring us up to do what we were morally obligated to do before God, stirring us up to do that which was already within us. Listen to how he puts it.

God helps us, by His teaching and revelation, whilst He opens the eyes of our heart; whilst He points out to us the future, that we may not be absorbed in the present; whilst He discovers to us the snares of the devil; whilst He enlightens us with the manifold and ineffable gift of heavenly grace.

Do you see his point? God does not redeem us through the offering of Christ. No, He redeems us by illuminating us, by teaching us, by outward inducements, that is, by fear of punishment and hope of reward. For Pelagius, salvation is not an issue of regeneration or redemption. It is, instead, a matter of education, enlightenment to our obligation and potential. Pelagius favorite word was "capacity". Put in modern terms, God through the use of external influences helps us be all that we can be through the use of our unencumbered wills.

Where Paul would say,

^{NIV} **Ephesians 2:1**...As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, ² in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. ³ All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. ⁴ But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵ made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions-- it is by grace you have been saved. ⁶ And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, ⁷ in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.

Pelagius would say,

You were ignorant and had lots of bad habits but because you maintained an untainted and free ability to still do that which is right, God gave you an education through external gifts. For through those graces you have been saved; and that really of yourselves, though I guess you could say the outward influences are the gift of God.

It seems different doesn't it.

So, let's sum up Pelagius' teaching.

- ought implies can
- we suffer no effects from original sin
- we sin out of habit rather than because of our nature
- we do not become sinners when we sin; death is a natural part of creation not related to sin
- Christ provides a moral example and encouragement to stop sinning, and that saves us.
- grace consists of any number of outward influences but it never violates our free will

Now, week after next we will discuss Augustine of Hippo, Pelagius' chief opponent. But Augustine is known by another name, a name that I truly love. He has in the history of the church been dubbed, "The Doctor of Grace". But before we leave, lest any of you should be confused about how grace, not Pelagian, but genuine biblical grace works itself out in the salvation of sinners, I want to share a personal story.

In high school, I had a best friend whose name was Doug. When ran around together, did everything together. Later after Beverly and I were married, I began to be concerned about those people I loved. Now, my theology wasn't very sophisticated and I had lots of sin in my life but my concern for my family and friends was very real. I began to pray for Doug's conversion. I bought him a Bible for Christmas. I gave him evangelistic books and tapes, and I witnessed to him every time I saw him. After a while, Doug got pretty tired of my religious fervor and our relationship drifted apart.

Beverly and I pressed on with our lives and with having children. Right after Aaris was born and Beverly came home from the hospital, I contracted the flu. Beverly had had a C-section, so it was all she could do to feed the baby. Her Mom used to come over during the daytime or Beverly probably would have starved to death. In those days, I was even more useless than I am now. So Beverly had had a C-section and I had the flu and I mean "death knocking at the door" kind of flu.

We didn't want to give Aaris the flu, so that night I was sleeping on the couch. I was laying there about 10:00 at night, with my barf-bucket by my side. Beverly was lying in the bed trying to sleep between feedings and the phone rang.

It was Doug.

"Burney, I need to come over and talk to you."

"Well Doug, tonight is not a very good night. Beverly, just had a baby, and I've got the flu. Why don't you come over later in the week."

"Burney, I need to talk to you tonight. I..., I need to talk to you about my soul."

"Look Doug, tonight is a terrible night. Maybe later..."

"I'll be there in five minutes."

"O.K., but let yourself in, I'm not getting off the couch."

Five minutes later, the front door eased open and Doug poked his head sheepishly around the corner. He came over and knelt down by the couch. I never moved. He started talking.

"Burney, I'm really concerned about my salvation."

"Mmmm", I replied.

"I don't know what happened but suddenly I see my life as a mass of sin".

"Mmmm", I responded.

"I don't know what else to do, but throw myself on the mercy of God."

"Mmmm", I interjected.

"So, if you don't mind I think I want to just bow my head right here, right now and ask God to save me."

"Oh, all right", I encouraged.

"Oh God, I see as I never have before the seriousness of my sin. I see how it for how terrible it is because I see You for how holy You are. I have no righteousness, no good works to offer You, but I understand that You sent Your Son into the world to pay the penalty that I deserve. Oh God, would You apply His payment to my account? Would You accept what He did on the cross in place of my sins? God, I may not turn over a new leaf. I may still be the same old sinner, but I want to be righteous. My deeds may still be lacking but my gratitude will have no lack, not now, not for all eternity. I pray these things in Christ name, pleading mercy for His sake. Amen"

Doug turned to me and smiled.

"Burney, thanks for helping me to come to Christ. I don't want to take up any more of your time. Tell Beverly hello. Congratulations on the new baby."

"Mmmm", I responded as he closed the door behind him.