

# The Pelagian Captivity of the Church

by R.C. Sproul

Shortly after the Reformation began, in the first few years after Martin Luther posted the Ninety-Five Theses on the church door at Wittenberg, he issued some short booklets on a variety of subjects. One of the most provocative was titled *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*. In this book Luther was looking back to that period of Old Testament history when Jerusalem was destroyed by the invading armies of Babylon and the elite of the people were carried off into captivity. Luther in the sixteenth century took the image of the historic Babylonian captivity and reapplied it to his era and talked about the new Babylonian captivity of the Church. He was speaking of Rome as the modern Babylon that held the Gospel hostage with its rejection of the biblical understanding of justification. You can understand how fierce the controversy was, how polemical this title would be in that period by saying that the Church had not simply erred or strayed, but had fallen — that it's actually now Babylonian; it is now in pagan captivity.

I've often wondered if Luther were alive today and came to our culture and looked, not at the liberal church community, but at evangelical churches, what would he have to say? Of course I can't answer that question with any kind of definitive authority, but my guess is this: If Martin Luther lived today and picked up his pen to write, the book he would write in our time would be entitled *The Pelagian Captivity of the Evangelical Church*. Luther saw the doctrine of justification as fueled by a deeper theological problem. He writes about this extensively in *The Bondage of the Will*. When we look at the Reformation and we see the solas of the Reformation — sola Scriptura, sola fide, solus Christus, soli Deo gloria, sola gratia — Luther was convinced that the real issue of the Reformation was the issue of grace; and that underlying the doctrine of sola fide, justification by faith alone, was the prior commitment to sola gratia, the concept of justification by grace alone.

In the Fleming Revell edition of *The Bondage of the Will*, the translators, J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston, included a somewhat provocative historical and theological introduction to the book itself. This is from the end of that introduction:

These things need to be pondered by Protestants today. With what right may we call ourselves children of the Reformation? Much modern Protestantism would be neither owned nor even recognised by the pioneer Reformers. *The Bondage of the Will* fairly sets before us what they believed about the salvation of lost mankind. In the light of it, we are forced to ask whether Protestant Christendom has not tragically sold its birthright between Luther's day and our own. Has not Protestantism today become more Erasmian than Lutheran? Do we not too often try to minimise and gloss over doctrinal differences for the sake of inter-party peace? Are we innocent of the doctrinal indifferentism with which Luther charged Erasmus? Do we still believe that doctrine matters?<sup>1</sup>

Historically, it's a simple matter of fact that Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, and all the leading Protestant theologians of the first epoch of the Reformation stood on precisely the same ground here. On other points they had their differences. In asserting the helplessness of man in sin and the sovereignty of God in grace, they were entirely at one. To all of them these doctrines were the very lifeblood of the Christian faith. A modern editor of Luther's works says this:

Whoever puts this book down without having realized that Evangelical theology stands or falls with the doctrine of the bondage of the will has read it in vain. The doctrine of free justification by faith alone, which became the storm center of so much controversy during the Reformation period, is often regarded as the heart of the Reformers' theology, but this is not accurate. The truth is that their thinking was really centered upon the contention of Paul, echoed by Augustine and others, that the sinner's entire salvation is by free and sovereign grace only, and that the doctrine of justification by faith was important to them because it safeguarded the principle of sovereign grace. The sovereignty of grace found expression in their thinking at a more profound level still in the doctrine of monergistic regeneration.<sup>2</sup>

That is to say, that the faith that receives Christ for justification is itself the free gift of a sovereign God. The principle of sola fide is not rightly understood until it is seen as anchored in the broader principle of sola gratia. What is the source of faith? Is it the God-given means whereby the God-given justification is received, or is it a condition of justification which is left to man to fulfill? Do you hear the difference? Let me put it in simple terms. I heard an evangelist recently say, "If God takes a thousand steps to reach out to you for your

redemption, still in the final analysis, you must take the decisive step to be saved.” Consider the statement that has been made by America’s most beloved and leading evangelical of the twentieth century, Billy Graham, who says with great passion, “God does ninety-nine percent of it but you still must do that last one percent.”

### What Is Pelagianism?

Now, let’s return briefly to my title, “The Pelagian Captivity of the Church.” What are we talking about? Pelagius was a monk who lived in Britain in the fifth century. He was a contemporary of the greatest theologian of the first millennium of Church history if not of all time, Aurelius Augustine, Bishop of Hippo in North Africa. We have heard of St. Augustine, of his great works in theology, of his *City of God*, of his *Confessions*, and so on, which remain Christian classics.

Augustine, in addition to being a titanic theologian and a prodigious intellect, was also a man of deep spirituality and prayer. In one of his famous prayers, Augustine made a seemingly harmless and innocuous statement in the prayer to God in which he says: “O God, command what you wouldst, and grant what thou dost command.” Now, would that give you apoplexy — to hear a prayer like that? Well it certainly set Pelagius, this British monk, into orbit. When he heard that, he protested vociferously, even appealing to Rome to have this ghastly prayer censured from the pen of Augustine. Here’s why. He said, “Are you saying, Augustine, that God has the inherent right to command anything that he so desires from his creatures? Nobody is going to dispute that. God inherently, as the creator of heaven and earth, has the right to impose obligations on his creatures and say, ‘Thou shalt do this, and thou shalt not do that.’ ‘Command whatever thou would’ — it’s a perfectly legitimate prayer.”

It’s the second part of the prayer that Pelagius abhorred when Augustine said, “and grant what thou dost command.” He said, “What are you talking about? If God is just, if God is righteous and God is holy, and God commands of the creature to do something, certainly that creature must have the power within himself, the moral ability within himself, to perform it or God would never require it in the first place.” Now that makes sense, doesn’t it? What Pelagius was saying is that moral responsibility always and everywhere implies moral capability or, simply, moral ability. So why would we have to pray, “God grant me, give me the gift of being able to do what you command me to do”? Pelagius saw in this statement a shadow being cast over the integrity of God himself, who would hold people responsible for doing something they cannot do.

So in the ensuing debate, Augustine made it clear that in creation, God commanded nothing from Adam or Eve that they were incapable of performing. But once transgression entered and mankind became fallen, God’s law was not repealed nor did God adjust his holy requirements downward to accommodate the weakened, fallen condition of his creation. God did punish his creation by visiting upon them the judgment of original sin, so that everyone after Adam and Eve who was born into this world was born already dead in sin. Original sin is not the first sin. It’s the result of the first sin; it refers to our inherent corruption, by which we are born in sin, and in sin did our mothers conceive us. We are not born in a neutral state of innocence, but we are born in a sinful, fallen condition. Virtually every church in the historic World Council of Churches at some point in their history and in their creedal development articulates some doctrine of original sin. So clear is that to the biblical revelation that it would take a repudiation of the biblical view of mankind to deny original sin altogether.

This is precisely what was at issue in the battle between Augustine and Pelagius in the fifth century. Pelagius said there is no such thing as original sin. Adam’s sin affected Adam and only Adam. There is no transmission or transfer of guilt or fallenness or corruption to the progeny of Adam and Eve. Everyone is born in the same state of innocence in which Adam was created. And, he said, for a person to live a life of obedience to God, a life of moral perfection, is possible without any help from Jesus or without any help from the grace of God. Pelagius said that grace — and here’s the key distinction — *facilitates* righteousness. What does “facilitate” mean?

It helps, it makes it more facile, it makes it easier, but you don’t have to have it. You can be perfect without it. Pelagius further stated that it is not only theoretically possible for some folks to live a perfect life without any assistance from divine grace, but there are in fact people who do it. Augustine said, “No, no, no, no . . . we are infected by sin by nature, to the very depths and core of our being — so much so that no human being has the moral power to incline himself to cooperate with the grace of God. The human will, as a result of original sin, still has the power to choose, but it is in bondage to its evil desires and inclinations. The condition of fallen humanity is one that Augustine would describe as the inability to not sin. In simple English, what Augustine

was saying is that in the Fall, man loses his moral ability to do the things of God and he is held captive by his own evil inclinations.

In the fifth century the Church condemned Pelagius as a heretic. Pelagianism was condemned at the Council of Orange, and it was condemned again at the Council of Florence, the Council of Carthage, and also, ironically, at the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century in the first three anathemas of the Canons of the Sixth Session. So, consistently throughout Church history, the Church has roundly and soundly condemned Pelagianism — because Pelagianism denies the fallenness of our nature; it denies the doctrine of original sin.

Now what is called semi-Pelagianism, as the prefix “semi” suggests, was a somewhat middle ground between full-orbed Augustinianism and full-orbed Pelagianism. Semi-Pelagianism said this: yes, there was a fall; yes, there is such a thing as original sin; yes, the constituent nature of humanity has been changed by this state of corruption and all parts of our humanity have been significantly weakened by the fall, so much so that without the assistance of divine grace nobody can possibly be redeemed, so that grace is not only helpful but it’s absolutely necessary for salvation. While we are so fallen that we can’t be saved without grace, we are not so fallen that we don’t have the ability to accept or reject the grace when it’s offered to us. The will is weakened but is not enslaved. There remains in the core of our being an island of righteousness that remains untouched by the fall. It’s out of that little island of righteousness, that little parcel of goodness that is still intact in the soul or in the will that is the determinative difference between heaven and hell. It’s that little island that must be exercised when God does his thousand steps of reaching out to us, but in the final analysis it’s that one step that we take that determines whether we go to heaven or hell — whether we exercise that little righteousness that is in the core of our being or whether we don’t. That little island Augustine wouldn’t even recognize as an atoll in the South Pacific. He said it’s a mythical island, that the will is enslaved, and that man is dead in his sin and trespasses.

Ironically, the Church condemned semi-Pelagianism as vehemently as it had condemned original Pelagianism. Yet by the time you get to the sixteenth century and you read the Catholic understanding of what happens in salvation the Church basically repudiated what Augustine taught and Aquinas taught as well. The Church concluded that there still remains this freedom that is intact in the human will and that man must cooperate with — and assent to — the prevenient grace that is offered to them by God. If we exercise that will, if we exercise a cooperation with whatever powers we have left, we will be saved. And so in the sixteenth century the Church reembraced semi-Pelagianism.

At the time of the Reformation, all the reformers agreed on one point: the moral inability of fallen human beings to incline themselves to the things of God; that all people, in order to be saved, are totally dependent, not ninety-nine percent, but one hundred percent dependent upon the monergistic work of regeneration in order to come to faith, and that faith itself is a gift of God. It’s not that we are offered salvation and that we will be born again *if we choose to believe*. But we can’t even believe until God in his grace and in his mercy first changes the disposition of our souls through his sovereign work of regeneration. In other words, what the reformers all agreed with was, unless a man is born again, he can’t even see the kingdom of God, let alone enter it. Like Jesus says in the sixth chapter of John, “No man can come to me unless it is given to him of the Father” — that the necessary condition for anybody’s faith and anybody’s salvation is regeneration.

## Evangelicals and Faith

Modern Evangelicalism almost uniformly and universally teaches that in order for a person to be born again, he must first exercise faith. You have to choose to be born again. Isn’t that what you hear? In a George Barna poll, more than seventy percent of “professing evangelical Christians” in America expressed the belief that man is basically good. And more than eighty percent articulated the view that God helps those who help themselves. These positions — or let me say it negatively — neither of these positions is semi-Pelagian. They’re both Pelagian. To say that we’re basically good is the Pelagian view. I would be willing to assume that in at least thirty percent of the people who are reading this issue, and probably more, if we really examine their thinking in depth, we would find hearts that are beating Pelagianism. We’re overwhelmed with it. We’re surrounded by it. We’re immersed in it. We hear it every day. We hear it every day in the secular culture. And not only do we hear it every day in the secular culture, we hear it every day on Christian television and on Christian radio.

In the nineteenth century, there was a preacher who became very popular in America, who wrote a book on theology, coming out of his own training in law, in which he made no bones about his Pelagianism. He

rejected not only Augustinianism, but he also rejected semi-Pelagianism and stood clearly on the subject of unvarnished Pelagianism, saying in no uncertain terms, without any ambiguity, that there was no Fall and that there is no such thing as original sin. This man went on to attack viciously the doctrine of the substitutionary atonement of Christ, and in addition to that, to repudiate as clearly and as loudly as he could the doctrine of justification by faith alone by the imputation of the righteousness of Christ. This man's basic thesis was, we don't need the imputation of the righteousness of Christ because we have the capacity in and of ourselves to become righteous. His name: Charles Finney, one of America's most revered evangelists. Now, if Luther was correct in saying that *sola fide* is the article upon which the Church stands or falls, if what the reformers were saying is that justification by faith alone is an essential truth of Christianity, who also argued that the substitutionary atonement is an essential truth of Christianity; if they're correct in their assessment that those doctrines are essential truths of Christianity, the only conclusion we can come to is that Charles Finney was not a Christian. I read his writings and I say, "I don't see how any Christian person could write this." And yet, he is in the Hall of Fame of Evangelical Christianity in America. He is the patron saint of twentieth-century Evangelicalism. And he is not semi-Pelagian; he is unvarnished in his Pelagianism.

### The Island of Righteousness

One thing is clear: that you can be purely Pelagian and be completely welcome in the evangelical movement today. It's not simply that the camel sticks his nose into the tent; he doesn't just come in the tent — he kicks the owner of the tent out. Modern Evangelicalism today looks with suspicion at Reformed theology, which has become sort of the third-class citizen of Evangelicalism. Now you say, "Wait a minute, R. C. Let's not tar everybody with the extreme brush of Pelagianism, because, after all, Billy Graham and the rest of these people are saying there was a Fall; you've got to have grace; there is such a thing as original sin; and semi-Pelagians do not agree with Pelagius' facile and sanguine view of unfallen human nature." And that's true. No question about it. But it's that little island of righteousness where man still has the ability, in and of himself, to turn, to change, to incline, to dispose, to embrace the offer of grace that reveals why historically semi-Pelagianism is not called semi-Augustinianism, but semi-Pelagianism.

I heard an evangelist use two analogies to describe what happens in our redemption. He said sin has such a strong hold on us, a stranglehold, that it's like a person who can't swim, who falls overboard in a raging sea, and he's going under for the third time and only the tops of his fingers are still above the water; and unless someone intervenes to rescue him, he has no hope of survival, his death is certain. And unless God throws him a life preserver, he can't possibly be rescued. And not only must God throw him a life preserver in the general vicinity of where he is, but that life preserver has to hit him right where his fingers are still extended out of the water, and hit him so that he can grasp hold of it. It has to be perfectly pitched. But still that man will drown unless he takes his fingers and curls them around the life preserver and God will rescue him. But unless that tiny little human action is done, he will surely perish.

The other analogy is this: A man is desperately ill, sick unto death, lying in his hospital bed with a disease that is fatal. There is no way he can be cured unless somebody from outside comes up with a cure, a medicine that will take care of this fatal disease. And God has the cure and walks into the room with the medicine. But the man is so weak he can't even help himself to the medicine; God has to pour it on the spoon. The man is so sick he's almost comatose. He can't even open his mouth, and God has to lean over and open up his mouth for him. God has to bring the spoon to the man's lips, but the man still has to swallow it.

Now, if we're going to use analogies, let's be accurate. The man isn't going under for the third time; he is stone cold dead at the bottom of the ocean. That's where you once were when you were dead in sin and trespasses and walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air. And while you were *dead* hath God quickened you together with Christ. God dove to the bottom of the sea and took that drowned corpse and breathed into it the breath of his life and raised you from the dead. And it's not that you were dying in a hospital bed of a certain illness, but rather, when you were born you were born D.O.A. That's what the Bible says: that we are morally stillborn.

Do we have a will? Yes, of course we have a will. Calvin said, if you mean by a free will a faculty of choosing by which you have the power within yourself to choose what you desire, then we all have free will. If you mean by free will the ability for fallen human beings to incline themselves and exercise that will to choose the things of God without the prior monergistic work of regeneration then, said Calvin, *free will* is far too grandiose a term to apply to a human being.

The semi-Pelagian doctrine of *free will* prevalent in the evangelical world today is a pagan view that denies the captivity of the human heart to sin. It underestimates the stranglehold that sin has upon us.

None of us wants to see things as bad as they really are. The biblical doctrine of human corruption is grim. We don't hear the Apostle Paul say, "You know, it's sad that we have such a thing as sin in the world; nobody's perfect. But be of good cheer. We're basically good." Do you see that even a cursory reading of Scripture denies this?

Now back to Luther. What is the source and status of faith? Is it the God-given means whereby the God-given justification is received? Or is it a condition of justification which is left to us to fulfill? Is your faith a work? Is it the one work that God leaves for you to do? I had a discussion with some folks in Grand Rapids, Michigan, recently. I was speaking on *sola gratia*, and one fellow was upset.

He said, "Are you trying to tell me that in the final analysis it's God who either does or doesn't sovereignly regenerate a heart?"

And I said, "Yes;" and he was very upset about that. I said, "Let me ask you this: are you a Christian?"

He said, "Yes."

I said, "Do you have friends who aren't Christians?"

He said, "Well, of course."

I said, "Why are you a Christian and your friends aren't? Is it because you're more righteous than they are?" He wasn't stupid. He wasn't going to say, "Of course it's because I'm more righteous. I did the right thing and my friend didn't." He knew where I was going with that question.

And he said, "Oh, no, no, no."

I said, "Tell me why. Is it because you are smarter than your friend?"

And he said, "No."

But he would not agree that the final, decisive issue was the grace of God. He wouldn't come to that. And after we discussed this for fifteen minutes, he said, "OK! I'll say it. I'm a Christian because I did the right thing, I made the right response, and my friend didn't."

What was this person trusting in for his salvation? Not in his works in general, but in the one work that he performed. And he was a Protestant, an evangelical. But his view of salvation was no different from the Roman view.

### **God's Sovereignty in Salvation**

This is the issue: Is it a part of God's gift of salvation, or is it in our own contribution to salvation? Is our salvation wholly of God or does it ultimately depend on something that we do for ourselves? Those who say the latter, that it ultimately depends on something we do for ourselves, thereby deny humanity's utter helplessness in sin and affirm that a form of semi-Pelagianism is true after all. It is no wonder then that later Reformed theology condemned Arminianism as being, in principle, both a return to Rome because, in effect, it turned faith into a meritorious work, and a betrayal of the Reformation because it denied the sovereignty of God in saving sinners, which was the deepest religious and theological principle of the reformers' thought. Arminianism was indeed, in Reformed eyes, a renunciation of New Testament Christianity in favor of New Testament Judaism. For to rely on oneself for faith is no different in principle than to rely on oneself for works, and the one is as un-Christian and anti-Christian as the other. In the light of what Luther says to Erasmus there is no doubt that he would have endorsed this judgment.

And yet this view is the overwhelming majority report today in professing evangelical circles. And as long as semi-Pelagianism, which is simply a thinly veiled version of real Pelagianism at its core — as long as it prevails in the Church, I don't know what's going to happen. But I know, however, what will not happen: there will not be a new Reformation. Until we humble ourselves and understand that no man is an island and that no man has an island of righteousness, that we are utterly dependent upon the unmixed grace of God for our salvation, we will not begin to rest upon grace and rejoice in the greatness of God's sovereignty, and we will not be rid of the pagan influence of humanism that exalts and puts man at the center of religion. Until that happens there will not be a new Reformation, because at the heart of Reformation teaching is the central place of the worship and gratitude given to God and God alone. *Soli Deo gloria*, to God alone be the glory.

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## Notes

1. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston, "Introduction" to the *The Bondage of the Will* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming Revell, 1957) pp. 59-60.

2. Ibid