



CHRISTIAN EDUCATION: LESSON 158

Though Pelagianism was condemned and the doctrines of Augustine declared to be the faith of the Church in the 5th century, opposition to Augustine's view surfaced, holding to a middle ground between the views of Pelagius and Augustine. This view became known as Semi-Pelagianism in the 16th century.

John Cassianus – There were a number of influential proponents of the Semi-Pelagian view, one of which was John Cassianus, who was born around 360 AD, in Scythia Minor (modern day Romania). He became a disciple of John Chrysostom, and was ordained a deacon by the Eastern Church, and later became the founder and abbot of the Massilia monastery (France). Contrary to Pelagius, Cassianus affirmed that Adam's sin was not limited to himself but affected his posterity. Though he taught that all men are born sinful, he rejected the Augustinian notion of original sin, affirming that after the fall man's will is wounded and susceptible to sin, but not dead and wholly inclined to sin, and thus he is able to turn to God. Rejecting Pelagius' view, Cassianus taught that the grace of God is necessary for salvation, but contrary to Augustine he maintained that men by their free will are able to seek God, who would then assist them. Also Cassianus rejected God's salvific grace as being irresistible, and believed that predestination is based on God's foreknowledge of people's future actions.

Though Cassianus died in 435 AD, these debates continued for many years. In 496 Pope Gelasius I condemned the writings of Cassianus, and later in 529 at the Second Council of Orange (France), the views of Cassianus and others like him, were condemned, and the teachings of Augustine were again affirmed as the doctrines of the Church. Even though the Western Church condemned Semi-Pelagianism in 529, the Roman Catholic Church later recognized Cassianus as a saint, and does so today. The Eastern Church never condemned the teachings of Cassianus, and also recognizes him as a saint.

Desiderius Erasmus – Desiderius Erasmus was born in Rotterdam, Holland, in 1466. He was ordained as a priest at the age of 25. He was a theologian and a Renaissance humanist. He completed Latin and Greek translations of the New Testament, the latter becoming the basis for the Textus Receptus used for the English translation of the New Testament by William Tyndale, and also the King James Version.

Martin Luther – Martin Luther was born in Eisleben, Germany, in 1483. In 1507 he was ordained as a Roman Catholic priest. In 1512 he received his doctor of theology from the University of Wittenberg, and became a professor of Bible. He was horrified at the abuses of the Church, including the selling of indulgences for the forgiveness of sins, and desiring a public debate he posted his Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the Wittenberg Church, on the 31st of October, 1517. Thus began the Protestant Reformation.

In 1524 Erasmus wrote the "Diatribes Concerning Free Will," where he criticized the Reformed view of free will. In response Martin Luther wrote "The Bondage of the Will" the following year. Though both agreed on the necessity of God's grace for salvation, the crucial issue debated was the nature of fallen man's will. Luther taught that God ordains everything that comes to pass, including the salvation of the elect. Erasmus decried such an Augustinian view. He defined free will as, "A power of the human will by which a man may apply himself to those things that lead to eternal salvation, or turn away from the same." For Luther this represented a return to Pelagius's view of free will. He argued that fallen man does not have such a free will, for his will is a slave to sin, and apart from grace can do no good. Erasmus also argued that if God commands something of man, that implies that man has the ability to obey it. Luther responded that, "Scripture ... uses these phrases to goad and rouse [man], that he may know by sure experience how unable he is to do any of these things" (Romans 3:20; Galatians 3:24).

Thus it is clear that even though Semi-Pelagianism was condemned by the Western Church in the 6th century, it continued to be taught within the Church, even until the time of the Protestant Reformation.