



CHRISTIAN EDUCATION: LESSON 162

Roman Catholic Church – Though condemned in the 6th century, Semi-Pelagianism was not eradicated from the Western Church, which along with a number of other views continued to be taught by theologians within the Church. These diverse and often contradictory teachings continued throughout the middle ages, with some leaning closer to the Augustinian side, such as Thomas Aquinas, while others leaning closer to the Semi-Pelagian side, such as John Duns Scotus, and still others in between.

In order to condemn the Protestant Reformation movement, and also to address such great doctrinal diversity within the Church, the Roman Catholic Church convened the Council of Trent, in Trento, Italy, which began in 1545 and ended in 1563. With respect to the will of fallen man, the Council in canon 5 of the sixth session declared that, “If any one saith, that, since Adam’s sin, the free will of man is lost and extinguished; or, that it is a thing with only a name, yea a name without a reality, a figment, in fine, introduced into the Church by Satan; let him be anathema.” This view of man’s free will was also affirmed in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (1992), declaring that, “Man is rational and therefore like God; he is created with free will and is master over his acts.”

Thus though the Catholic Church has explicitly condemned Pelagianism, that man can by his own free will and without the grace of God live a God honoring life; and though it has refuted the Semi-Pelagian notion that man can by his own free will initiate salvation; nevertheless it did not in Trent nor since fully condemn Semi-Pelagianism, continuing to hold to Semi-Pelagian views of man’s natural freedom and ability to do good or evil, and resist the grace of God. Thus Rome continues to teach a synergistic doctrine of salvation. This is a drastic shift from and in reality the denial of the Augustinian view of the total depravity or inability of fallen man, and the irresistibility of God’s grace.

Eastern Orthodox Church – Eastern Orthodox theology affirms that though man is weakened by the fall, like Adam retains his moral freedom, the freedom to do good or evil. The Orthodox view of salvation is one of cooperation between God and man, between God’s grace and man’s free will choices, thus it is a synergistic process. Though God’s grace is necessary for salvation, man is able to seek God, and when further assisted by grace is able to respond in faith.

We see this in the writings of the early church fathers. Regarding the cooperation between God and man, John Chrysostom, the 4th century bishop of Constantinople writes, “It depends on us, and on him. For we must first choose the good; and then he leads us to his own.” Also that, “For it is ours to choose and to wish; but God’s to complete and to bring to an end.” According to Calvin, Saint Jerome, the 4th century priest and theologian, wrote, “It is ours to begin, God’s to finish.” Chrysostom’s pupil John Cassianus affirmed that man by his free will is able to initiate the work of salvation. He is quoted as saying that, grace is given “in order that he who has begun to will may be assisted,” and not to give “the power to will.” The Eastern Church never condemned the teachings of Cassianus, and regards him as a saint of the Church. We see similar views in the writings of John of Damascus, the 7th century Syrian priest.

Thus fallen man has the ability to take the first step to God, and then having received divine grace he has the power to cooperate with it or reject it. For the Eastern Orthodox Church, anything else is considered as fatalism, which undermines the humanity of man. In such doctrines the Eastern Orthodox Church is even further from Reformed teachings than the Catholic Church, for we see many similarities with Semi-Pelagian teachings, which were condemned at the Second Council of Orange in 529.

Ultimately, though there are differences regarding the nature of man, God’s grace, and the starting point of salvation, which should not be minimized, Arminianism, Catholicism and Orthodoxy hold in common a synergistic view of salvation, rejecting the biblical teaching of monergistic regeneration.